



Lived Experiences of Football Trafficking Victims and Stakeholders' Communication Interventions in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: Football trafficking is a growing form of exploitation facing young Nigerian players, who are deceived by fraudulent agents promising trials, contracts and international mobility. Understanding victims' lived experiences alongside the communication interventions of media professionals, advocacy groups, academy coaches, and football organisations is essential for effective prevention.

Objective: This study examined the lived experiences of football trafficking victims in Nigeria and the communication interventions deployed by stakeholders, together with the constraints that limit their implementation and sustainability.

Method: A descriptive phenomenological design was employed. Twenty-seven participants (21 male, 6 female) were purposively sampled: five victims, three organisational spokespersons, nine media professionals, five academy coaches and five advocacy members. In-depth interviews were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

Results: Poverty, limited education and aspirations for socioeconomic mobility increased vulnerability to deceptive recruitment, resulting in financial loss, exploitative contracts, poor living conditions and psychological trauma. Stakeholders used community outreach, seminars, workshops, interpersonal communication, social media and educational programmes, yet inadequate funding, personnel shortages, logistical barriers, low public awareness and weak inter-agency collaboration undermined effectiveness.

Conclusion: Football trafficking remains a serious threat to economically disadvantaged Nigerian youth. Existing communication interventions, though well-intentioned, are fragmented, under-resourced and insufficiently coordinated to counter sophisticated trafficking networks.

Unique Contribution: The study is the first in the Nigerian context to connect victims' first-hand accounts with stakeholders' reported interventions and constraints, bridging experiential and institutional perspectives.

Key Recommendation: Stakeholders should develop a coordinated, adequately funded, multi-agency communication strategy, anchored in schools, academies and digital platforms, that directly addresses the identified resource and coordination gaps.

Keywords: Football trafficking, lived experiences, vulnerability, communication interventions, Nigeria.



INTRODUCTION

Football trafficking is the deceptive recruitment, transportation or abandonment of aspiring footballers by agents, scouts or intermediaries who exploit ambitions for professional careers abroad (Poli, 2010; Esson, 2020). According to Poli (2010), trafficking in football occurs when a promised trial or contract is delivered under abusive terms, whereas trafficking through football occurs when the opportunity is fabricated and the player is abandoned after arrival. This study addresses both forms as they appear in Nigeria, where victims reported fabricated placements as well as contracts that were delivered but exploitative. The phenomenon is distinguished from unlicensed recruitment without deception and from fraudulent agent activity aimed at established professionals. As used here, football trafficking satisfies the Palermo Protocol elements of recruitment or transportation, deception or abuse of vulnerability, and exploitation (UNODC, 2000).

Nigeria is especially exposed because of its large pool of talented young players and the widespread belief that football offers a pathway out of poverty (Abderrahmane, 2022; Nkang, 2024). Families often consent to travel without legal advice or verification of an intermediary's credentials. Poverty, limited education, weak parental guidance and low awareness of recruitment tactics remain the principal sources of vulnerability (Kobo, 2021). Deception typically begins with an intermediary who claims club connections abroad and demands fees for travel, visas or agency services (Nkang, 2024). Digital platforms have extended this reach. Recruiters use social media, messaging applications and targeted advertisements to impersonate legitimate scouts (Lazarus, 2025). Recent West African cases show how online recruitment, document confiscation and coerced fraud can operate within a single scheme.

Communication is central because trafficking is an information failure: families and players act on incomplete or false claims. Social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) holds that sustained, culturally appropriate messages through trusted channels can shift knowledge, attitudes and decisions among at-risk audiences (Figuerola et al., 2002). Awareness campaigns, survivor testimonies and counsel by trusted figures should therefore clarify tactics, warning signs and reporting routes. Media professionals can investigate networks; advocacy organisations can run awareness and support campaigns; academy coaches can offer grassroots guidance; and football governing bodies can communicate and enforce recruitment rules. These four groups were selected as the stakeholders most directly responsible for anti-trafficking communication in Nigerian football.

Existing research has documented victims' vulnerability and exploitation (Kobo, 2021; Abderrahmane, 2022; Nkang, 2024), while communication scholarship has examined stakeholder strategies against human trafficking more broadly (Farjia et al., 2021; Omojunikanbi et al., 2019). Few studies have joined victims' first-hand accounts with stakeholder interventions in a single Nigerian football context. Against this background, this study explored the lived experiences of football trafficking victims in Nigeria and examined the communication interventions deployed by relevant stakeholders to combat the practice. Specifically, the study examined the factors contributing to victims' vulnerability, the recruitment tactics employed by traffickers, the forms of exploitation experienced by victims, the communication interventions deployed by stakeholders, and the challenges affecting the implementation and sustainability of these interventions.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are some lived experiences of football trafficking victims in Nigeria?
2. What communication interventions are deployed by stakeholders to combat football trafficking in Nigeria?
3. What challenges constrain the implementation and sustainability of communication interventions for combating football trafficking in Nigeria?

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL WORKS

Experiences of Football Trafficking Victims

Lived experience denotes knowledge gained through first-hand involvement in events, rather than through second-hand institutional or media accounts (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Empirical work that captures these meanings remains thin. Kobo's (2021) phenomenological study in Senegal, based on four interviews with two trafficked players and two parents, located vulnerability in the desire for a European career, household poverty and weak risk awareness, and recorded families' sense that football authorities had failed to warn them. The design is aligned with the present study, yet the sample is too small and the Senegalese regulatory setting too distinct to transfer findings uncritically to Nigeria. Nkang's (2021) socio-legal analysis of African football minors supplies a closer legal and regional frame, showing how intermediaries exploit both fabricated trials and abusive contracts, but it privileges policy evaluation over victims' own sense-making. Onwumechili and Akpan (2020) interviewed 15 Nigerian elite-league players about intra-national migration and family obligation. Although they do not study trafficking, their accounts of family investment and the moral burden of mobility help explain why Nigerian households consent to risky overseas recruitment.

Esson (2020) complicates a purely victim-centred reading. Interviews with West African youth in Ghana and Paris show that players often narrate themselves as agents pursuing mobility under structural constraint, and that this self-presentation can be used by authorities to withhold trafficking recognition. A phenomenological reading must therefore attend both to the choices victims describe and to the deception those choices exposed them to. Abderrahmane (2022) and FIFPRO (2019) corroborate the same tactics, fee-based deception, stranded players and exploitative contracts, but from journalistic and post-arrest bases rather than phenomenology. The FIFPRO case is instructive here not because the Argentine–Portuguese regulatory environment resembles Nigeria's, but because the deception mechanism it documents, an intermediary exploiting a player's trust and mobility ambitions through a fabricated or bad-faith club connection, recurs even in a context with comparatively stronger player-protection infrastructure than Nigeria's. That the same tactic succeeds across such different regulatory settings suggests the vulnerability lies less in any single country's oversight regime and more in the structural information asymmetry between aspiring players and intermediaries, which is precisely the asymmetry the present study's victims describe. Across these sources, the recurring conditions are economic precarity, an information deficit and intermediaries who mimic legitimate scouting. What remains unaddressed is a Nigerian phenomenological account that holds together victims' meanings of deception and agency and relates those meanings to stakeholder communication within a single national field.



Stakeholders' Deployment of Communication Interventions

Communication scholarship distinguishes several related but conceptually distinct interventions that are frequently, and imprecisely, collapsed into the single label of "communication intervention." Awareness creation refers to one-way dissemination of information to a broad audience; risk communication refers to the targeted communication of specific hazard information intended to enable protective decisions; advocacy communication refers to efforts directed at influencing policy or enforcement; interpersonal communication refers to direct, trusted-source dialogue with at-risk individuals; and social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) refers to sustained, theory-driven efforts to shift not merely knowledge but practice, typically combining several of the preceding approaches within a coordinated strategy (Figueroa et al., 2002). Football trafficking prevention plausibly requires several of these approaches simultaneously, which is one reason this study treats stakeholders' interventions as a differentiated set rather than as a single undifferentiated category.

Beyond the general communication-strategy literature, evidence on the specific communication roles of football-industry stakeholders is uneven. Investigative sports journalism has documented trafficking cases (e.g., Kobo, 2021; Abderrahmane, 2022), but the literature treats media professionals as sources of exposure rather than examining their communication practices as a deliberate intervention. Academy coaches' communication role is almost entirely absent from the trafficking literature, despite coaches' documented proximity to players and families in general football-development research; this gap is notable given that grassroots, interpersonal contact is precisely the channel Farjia et al. (2021) identify as most effective. Football governing bodies and government agencies appear in the literature primarily as regulatory or policy actors (Nkang, 2021, 2024) rather than as communicators, so their role in disseminating trafficking-risk information to players and clubs is undocumented. Advocacy organisations' awareness and outreach work is acknowledged in general anti-trafficking communication research (Farjia et al., 2021) but not in a football-specific context. Parents and community leaders, despite being central to the consent decisions that expose players to risk (Onwumechili & Akpan, 2020), are not treated as communication targets or intermediaries in any of the studies reviewed here. This unevenness across stakeholder categories is itself part of the gap the present study addresses.

Farjia et al. (2021), reporting for Share-Net Bangladesh, examined communication strategies for combating the trafficking of women in Bangladesh using a mixed-methods approach that combined survey data with in-depth interviews of survivors and anti-trafficking stakeholders. The study found that poverty and poor living conditions drove vulnerability, and that significant information gaps existed among less-educated populations regarding the conditions they might encounter in destination countries. The authors recommended greater investment in interpersonal communication, community meetings and counter-trafficking information delivered through languages and channels that target audiences already trust. The population (predominantly women trafficked for domestic or sexual exploitation) and the national context differ substantially from the present study, yet the structural communication lesson, that trusted, locally embedded channels outperform generic mass messaging, is directly transferable and is one of the few pieces of empirical, non-Nigerian evidence available on anti-trafficking communication design.



Omojunikanbi et al. (2019) examined the communication channels used by the Niger Delta Development Commission and their relationship to public awareness of its development programmes in Nigeria. Although this study does not concern trafficking, it is retained here for a specific methodological finding: that awareness outcomes were determined less by the mere availability of communication channels than by the degree of alignment between the channel and the specific audience it was intended to reach. This channel–audience alignment principle is directly transferable to anti-trafficking communication design, where campaigns may fail not for lack of channels but because the channels used do not match the media habits, literacy levels or trust structures of aspiring footballers and their families.

Taken together, the empirical literature establishes what is broadly known about anti-trafficking and development communication, namely that channel selection, audience targeting and locally trusted messengers determine effectiveness, but it establishes very little about how Nigerian football-industry stakeholders specifically design, deploy and coordinate such interventions, or about how these interventions relate to what victims themselves report having needed to know before they were deceived. This is the specific empirical gap the present study addresses, by combining victims' lived experience of deception with stakeholders' accounts of the communication interventions and constraints they encounter in responding to it.

METHODOLOGY

This study combined a descriptive (transcendental) phenomenological design for interviews with football-trafficking victims with qualitative key-informant interviews with institutional and professional actors. Phenomenological work was guided by bracketing: prior assumptions about trafficking and football migration were deliberately set aside during collection and interpretation so that analysis remained oriented to participants' own meaning-making rather than to preconceived categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The two participant groups were treated as analytically distinct and mapped directly onto the research questions. Victim interviews addressed lived experience of recruitment, deception, exploitation and aftermath (RQ1). Stakeholder interviews addressed communication interventions, intended audiences and implementation challenges (RQs 2–3). Victims were not classified as stakeholders within the Nigerian football industry.

Five male Nigerian victims aged 17–24 was recruited through referrals from two advocacy organisations engaged in football-trafficking casework. Inclusion required self-identification as having experienced deceptive football-related recruitment, exploitation abroad, or exploitation during an attempted international transfer, and age 16 or older. The sample size reflects well-documented access and safety constraints in trafficking research and is consistent with phenomenological guidance that three to ten participants can sustain in-depth engagement with each account. Recruitment continued until no substantively new experiential themes emerged across narratives, at which point saturation was judged to have been reached. Victims were drawn from the South West, South East and South South; no female survivors and no participants from the North Central, North East or North West were reached through available referral pathways, a limitation of the sampling frame.



Twenty-two stakeholders were purposively selected for professional responsibility in football governance, journalism, grassroots coaching or anti-trafficking advocacy. They comprised three league spokespersons (Nigeria Premier Football League, Nigeria National League and Nationwide League One); nine media professionals with at least ten years of football-reporting experience across print, radio and television; five academy coaches with 10–12 years' experience from the South West, South South, North Central and South East (North East and North West were not represented among coaches); and five members of advocacy organisations. Category, gender, experience and geopolitical zone are reported systematically to make the composition of the sample transparent.

Separate interview guides were developed from the research questions and the trafficking and sports-communication literature. The victim guide focused on recruitment, deception, exploitation and post-return experience; stakeholder guides focused on interventions, audiences and barriers to implementation. Two senior colleagues in Mass Communication reviewed the guides for content and face validity. The interview guides were subsequently pilot-tested with two academy coaches and one advocacy practitioner who were not included in the main sample. Minor revisions were made to wording, sequencing and probes on the basis of that feedback. Interviews were conducted individually, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Fieldwork was conducted between March and June 2026. Victim interviews were held face-to-face in private settings arranged through the referring advocacy organisations. Stakeholder interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone or video call, according to participants' location and availability. All interviews were conducted in English, lasted approximately 45–75 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent and were transcribed verbatim.

Transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarisation through repeated reading; generation of initial codes; searching for candidate themes; reviewing themes against coded extracts and the full dataset; defining and naming themes; and producing the analytic account. In keeping with a phenomenological emphasis, theme salience was judged by experiential richness and significance for participants' meaning-making, not by the frequency of coded segments. Researchers kept a reflexive journal of assumptions and positionality throughout collection and analysis and revisited these notes during coding. Credibility was supported by peer debriefing with two colleagues uninvolved in fieldwork, member checking of theme summaries with a participant subsample, and an audit trail of analytic decisions.

Ethical approval was obtained from Babcock University review board. Written informed consent was secured from adult participants; parental or guardian consent and the participant's assent were obtained for the 17-year-old victims. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to decline questions or withdraw without penalty, and confidentiality measures including pseudonyms and restricted storage of recordings and transcripts. Survivor interviews were conducted with attention to the risk of re-traumatisation, and information on psychosocial support services was offered. No financial inducement was provided.



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

Category	n	Gender	Age/ Experience	Location(s)/ zone(s)	Geopolitical	Nationality
Football trafficking victims	5	Male (5)	17–24 years	South West, South East, South South		Nigeria
Spokespersons (NPFL,>NNL, NLO)	3	Male (3)	2–3 years with organisation	Abuja; Osun (South West)		Nigeria
Media professionals	9	Male (4) & Female (5)	15–30 years' experience	Lagos (South West)		Nigeria
Football academy coaches	5	Male (5)	10–12 years' experience	South West, South South, North Central, South East		Nigeria
Advocacy group members	5	Male (2) & Female (3)	5–14 years' experience	South West, South South		Nigeria

Source: Researchers' fieldwork (2026).

Research Question 1: Lived Experiences of Football Trafficking Victims

Theme 1: Vulnerability and Deceptive Recruitment. Victims described being approached by intermediaries who exploited their ambition for a professional football career and, in several cases, presented themselves as having verified connections to clubs abroad. Victim 1 recounted being promised a trial in Japan following a scouting programme in Nigeria, only to be redirected to Portugal by the agent; his father, acting as his manager, ultimately threatened to report the agent to the Nigeria Football Federation and FIFA after the agreed arrangement was not honoured.

"I was promised trials with a club in Japan after a scouting programme in Nigeria... but somehow the agent took me to Portugal... I was in Portugal for seven months, and I ended up not going to Japan due to visa issues and came back to Nigeria" (Victim 1).

Victim 2 described a similar pattern of fabricated club affiliation, in this case involving Turkey, followed by isolation and exploitation rather than the promised trial.

"I was promised a chance of pursuing my football career overseas by an agent who took me to Turkey on the pretext that I would sign for a club... instead, I found myself isolated and exploited after spending months in Turkey" (Victim 2).

Across accounts, victims' narratives combined an acknowledgement of their own ambition and willingness to travel with a clear description of the deception to which that ambition exposed them, consistent with Esson's (2020) caution against reading such accounts as pure victimhood. What victims consistently identified as the point of failure was not the decision to pursue an opportunity abroad, but the absence of any means to verify, in advance, whether the intermediary's claims were genuine.



Theme 2: Exploitation and Psychological Trauma

Victims described physical, emotional and financial exploitation once abroad. Victim 3 described realising, only once training began, that the promised trial did not exist.

"It was when they were not telling me anything about the trials that brought me to Ukraine that I became uncomfortable... I was forced to live in deplorable conditions. I endured the pain while holding onto the belief that someday, somehow, I would find a way to escape" (Victim 3).

Victims 4 and 5 both described signing contracts, in a language they did not fully understand, that they later discovered served their agent's financial interest rather than their own.

"Anytime I demanded my money, the club officials would refer me to my contract... the terms of contract were not in my interest but in the interest of my agent... I never realised I was signing myself into slavery" (Victims 4 and 5).

These accounts illustrate that exploitation in football trafficking is not confined to cases of outright fabrication (trafficking through football); it also occurs where a contract is genuinely delivered, but on exploitative terms the player could not meaningfully consent to because of language barriers and unequal bargaining power (trafficking in football, per Poli, 2010). Across both patterns, victims described lasting psychological effects, including a persistent sense of betrayal and, for two participants, difficulty trusting subsequent recruitment offers even after returning to Nigeria.

Research Question 2: Communication Interventions Deployed by Stakeholders

Stakeholders described a range of communication interventions, which varied systematically by stakeholder type.

Table 2: Stakeholders' interventions, targeted audiences, and stated purpose

Stakeholder	Communication channel/ intervention	Target audience	Stated purpose
Football academy coaches	Home visits; WhatsApp groups; academy Facebook pages; in-house literacy classes	Players and parents	Monitor player welfare; sustain education; build trusted, direct communication with families.
Advocacy groups	Community outreach events; seminars; workshops; survivor-narrative sharing	Aspiring footballers, families, communities	Create awareness of trafficking tactics, warning signs and support resources.
Media professionals	Investigative reporting and exposés	General public; policymakers	Expose trafficking networks and hold fraudulent agents accountable
Football organisations (NPFL,>NNL, NLO)	Digital and social media campaigns; sensitisation workshops	Players, clubs, communities	Mobilise stakeholders and sensitise players and communities to trafficking risks

Source: Researchers' fieldwork (2026).



Advocate 1 described the importance of matching the channel to the audience and of using survivor testimony as a persuasive resource, echoing the channel–audience alignment principle identified by Omojunikanbi et al. (2019):

"Using the right communication channels is also a key factor for the success of football trafficking awareness; sharing the stories of survivors also helps, while factors which can lead to its failure include... when you fail to identify and target your specific audience" (Advocate 1).

Academy Coach 2 described a comparatively resource-light but sustained model of interpersonal communication built around direct, ongoing contact with players and their families:

"I created a WhatsApp group and also I visit them at home to check on their well-being, discuss with their parents... We also have a Facebook page that contains the profile of all our students" (Academy Coach 2).

These accounts indicate that the interventions currently in use span several of the communication categories distinguished earlier: coaches' home visits and messaging groups function primarily as interpersonal communication; advocacy outreach and workshops function primarily as awareness creation with elements of risk communication; and media investigations function primarily as advocacy communication directed at accountability. No stakeholder category, however, described a formally coordinated strategy that combined these approaches within a single campaign, a gap examined further under Research Question 3.

Research Question 3: Challenges Constraining Implementation and Sustainability

Stakeholders across all four categories identified overlapping resource and coordination constraints. A media professional questioned the adequacy of current institutional arrangements for addressing football trafficking specifically:

"It has not been effective. Football trafficking affects the poor because they see it as an escape from poverty. I believe another agency should be set up for football trafficking... In Nigeria, a reporter is saddled with so many beats. But overseas, it is not so" (Journalist 4).

Advocate 1 identified funding, personnel and logistics as the primary constraints on sustaining existing interventions:

"Personnel, limited funding and logistical support are some of the challenges we are facing in sustaining the communication strategies that we are using... we are dealing with a complex issue that is done in secret" (Advocate 1).

A spokesperson for one football organisation described collaboration across actors as central to the organisation's approach, while implicitly acknowledging that such collaboration remains informal rather than institutionalised:

"In working in collaboration with all actors around the platform, it is our objective to sensitise and mobilise people... We also communicate this kind of information through digital means and social media" (Spokesperson 3).



Taken together, these accounts indicate that the principal constraint on communication effectiveness is not a lack of awareness among stakeholders of what needs to be done, but a lack of sustained funding, dedicated personnel and, most consistently, formal coordination mechanisms linking the four stakeholder categories, each of which currently designs and delivers its own interventions largely independently of the others.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The victims' accounts, whose ages at the time of the reported events ranged from 17 to 24 years, corroborate the central finding of Kobo's (2021) Senegalese study that poverty, limited education and an absence of verified information about recruitment intermediaries created the conditions under which deception could succeed. This is consistent, too, with Nkang's (2024) observation that foreign clubs and their intermediaries rarely interrogate the provenance of trial invitations or the legitimacy of the agent–player relationship, leaving the burden of verification almost entirely on families who are least equipped to carry it. Where the present findings extend this literature is in showing, through victims' own accounts, that deception operated in Nigeria through both trafficking through football (fabricated club interest followed by abandonment, as in Victims 1 to 3) and trafficking in football (a genuine but exploitative contract, as in Victims 4 and 5), a distinction the existing single-case studies, such as Kobo (2021) and FIFPRO (2019), do not, individually, capture together.

The communication findings both support and complicate Omojunikanbi et al.'s (2019) channel–audience alignment principle. Stakeholders' own accounts show they are broadly aware of this principle, as reflected in Advocate 1's emphasis on identifying and targeting a specific audience, yet the interventions actually deployed remain fragmented across stakeholder categories rather than integrated into a single, audience-differentiated strategy of the kind envisaged by SBCC frameworks (Figueroa et al., 2002). This mirrors Farjia et al.'s (2021) finding, from a very different trafficking context in Bangladesh, that community-level, interpersonal and trusted-source channels outperform generic messaging; Nigerian coaches' use of home visits and WhatsApp groups appears to instantiate exactly this principle at the grassroots level, even though no stakeholder described this practice as part of a deliberate, theory-informed communication strategy. The consistency of this pattern across two otherwise dissimilar national and trafficking contexts strengthens, rather than merely illustrates, the case for interpersonal, community-embedded communication as a core design principle for anti-trafficking messaging generally.

The most consistent finding across all four stakeholder categories, inadequate funding, limited personnel and weak inter-agency coordination, corroborates the general observation that communication interventions, however well designed in principle, are only as effective as the resources and coordination structures that sustain them (Omojunikanbi et al., 2019). This study's contribution is to show, specifically for Nigerian football trafficking, that this constraint operates less as a resource problem within any single stakeholder category and more as a coordination problem between them: media, advocacy, coaching and governance actors each maintain separate, resource-constrained interventions with no formal mechanism connecting them, a structural gap that a purely awareness-focused reading of the problem would not reveal.



CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer three questions: what football trafficking victims in Nigeria experience, what communication interventions stakeholders deploy in response, and what constrains those interventions. The evidence shows that victims are drawn into trafficking through a combination of economic vulnerability, information asymmetry and the deliberate mimicry of legitimate recruitment practices by intermediaries, and that the resulting exploitation takes both the fabricated (trafficking through football) and the contractually exploitative (trafficking in football) forms identified in the wider literature. Stakeholders, in turn, have not been passive: media professionals, advocacy groups, football academy coaches and football organisations each deploy communication interventions consistent, in principle, with established communication-for-change approaches. However, these interventions remain fragmented across stakeholder categories, under-funded, understaffed and, most critically, uncoordinated. The central conclusion of this study is therefore that football trafficking persists in Nigeria not for want of stakeholder awareness or willingness to act, but because no formal mechanism currently connects the fragmented interventions that stakeholders already deploy into a coherent, adequately resourced communication strategy capable of matching the scale and adaptability of trafficking networks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Nigeria Football Federation should, in collaboration with the NPFL, NNL and NLO, establish a dedicated, adequately funded inter-agency communication task force linking football governance bodies, media organisations, advocacy groups and football academies, to coordinate rather than duplicate existing anti-trafficking communication efforts.
2. Stakeholders are to secure sustained, ring-fenced funding for anti-trafficking communication activity, rather than relying on the ad hoc resources currently reported by advocacy groups and academy coaches.
3. Football academies and advocacy organisations should formalise the interpersonal, community-embedded communication practices already in informal use (such as home visits and family WhatsApp groups) into structured, audience-differentiated communication protocols, informed by SBCC principles (Figueroa et al., 2002).
4. Media houses to designate specialist reporters for trafficking and player-welfare issues, addressing journalists' own reported concern that beat overload limits sustained investigative coverage of football trafficking.
5. The Nigeria Football Federation should strengthen and enforce agent-licensing and player-recruitment regulations, including mandatory verification of foreign club affiliations before a player is permitted to travel, to close the verification gap identified in victims' accounts.
6. Communication interventions should integrate survivor narratives, of the kind shared by victims in this study, as a deliberate and recurring component of awareness campaigns targeted at aspiring footballers and their families.



Ethical Clearance

Approval to proceed was obtained, and each participant gave informed consent before data collection. Participants were told that the work was academic, that involvement was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no commercial or financial relationships that could be interpreted as a conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Femi-Babafemi Ejoro Abigail conceived the study, designed the research, collected and analysed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Charles M. Ekeh provided supervision and critical reviews. Both authors approved the final version and accept responsibility for its content.

Artificial intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

AI tools such as Perplexity, QuillBot and Grammarly were used in moderation to search for literature, synthesise grammar and to assist with document formatting. All AI-assisted output was checked, revised and verified by the authors, who remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the conclusions of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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