

BRUNCH & BRAINSTORM

Before Kickoff: Trafficking and the World Cup: A Conversation with Expert Sims Maqubela



July 16, 2026
Takeaways

Key Discussion Takeaways

- Labor trafficking in the sport economy is **not limited to hidden or informal spaces**. It can happen inside respected, visible, and fast-growing industries when demand for labor increases quickly and oversight does not keep pace.
- Large sporting events can create rapid labor needs **before, during, and after the event**. These needs can make workers more vulnerable to false recruitment, debt, visa-related control, long hours, isolation, wage theft, and fear of reporting.
- Prevention requires more than awareness. Providers, sports organizations, host communities, labor partners, unions, inspectors, and survivor consultants need **clear systems for outreach, reporting, referral, and long-term support**.

Why Major Sporting Events Create Risk

- Events like the World Cup bring global attention, large crowds, and urgent workforce needs.
- The 2026 World Cup was described as historic because of its size, multiple host countries, and expanded number of teams.
- Preparation and operations require large numbers of workers across construction, hospitality, security, tourism, transportation, public works, technology, equipment installation, and other support roles.
- When labor demand rises quickly, recruitment and subcontracting systems can become harder to monitor.
- The pressure to prepare venues, host visitors, and generate profit can make workers easier to exploit if accountability systems are weak.

Common Risk Factors for Workers

- False or misleading recruitment promises.
- High recruitment fees and debt that make workers feel unable to leave.
- Migrant workers leaving fragile economies to support family members.
- Temporary visas tied to one employer, which can increase employer control.
- Language barriers and limited understanding of workers' rights.
- Fear of retaliation, deportation, job loss, debt, or instability.
- Subcontracting chains that obscure who is responsible for working conditions.
- Lack of safe, trusted reporting pathways.

Possible Warning Signs

- A worker appears to be present all the time or working unusually long hours.
- A worker seems isolated, closely monitored, or afraid to speak freely.
- A worker gives scripted answers about their visa, job, or living situation.
- A worker lacks control over documents, transportation, pay, housing, or schedule.
- Workers appear to be transported together from housing to a workplace and have little visible freedom of movement.
- Important note: warning signs should prompt trauma-informed inquiry and referral, not assumptions or unsafe intervention.

Industries and Setting to Watch

- Construction and stadium/infrastructure work.
- Roads, transportation, and public works.
- Hospitality, hotels, food service, and tourism.
- Security roles and event staffing.
- Equipment installation, staging, technology, and venue operations.
- Sports camps, clinics, coaching programs, and other community sport services connected to event excitement.

Response Needs

- Basic needs support, including food, transportation, clothing, communication access, and short-term stability needs.
- Trauma-informed counseling and support.
- Emergency physical and mental health support.
- Safe housing and legal assistance partnerships.
- Clear plans for transitional and long-term goals beyond the event.
- Support that recognizes fear, mistrust, and prior experiences of not being believed.