



“As a survivor, you are the expert in the room”: Claire Heafford of Gymnasts for Change and Gymnasts for Change International on centering survivor voices and galvanizing political activism.

Alec Saelens

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Alec Saelens: Please introduce yourself and tell me about your background.

Claire Heafford: My name is Claire Heafford. I'm the co-founder of Gymnasts for Change and the co-founder of Gymnasts for Change International, which is now a registered charity in the UK. We began as Gymnasts for Change four years ago as a campaign group. We began by responding to the film *Athlete A* that came out on Netflix, which was about the trial of Larry Nassar and the sexual abuse of athletes within the U.S. system, and the broader context of physical abuse and gender-based emotional abuse and violence within the sport of gymnastics that allowed Larry Nassar to operate with impunity.

For athletes around the world who'd been in the sport, when they saw that film, they recognized a lot of the details, and it became a Me Too movement for the world of gymnastics. Athletes started posting on social media, and it became a movement called the Gymnast Alliance. And I set up Gymnasts for Change to capture what was going on in the Gymnast Alliance movement on social media, and to make sure that that moment wasn't lost, and that we could build on the momentum of what came out on social media and turn it into a proper social movement that could affect change at the level of governance, both within the sport and at the level of the IOC

[International Olympic Committee] but also internationally in the different territories at the level of government and law changes.

Alec Saelens: Who is the intended audience of this work? Who are you specifically targeting?

Claire Heafford: The movement was generated by athletes and survivors, and I'm a survivor of emotional and physical abuse in gymnastics myself. So in its initiation, the audience was intended as other survivors, and what we created in the first few years was a network of survivors globally, where key individuals just sort of naturally [emerged]. There were some survivors who were better equipped to become leaders, and those key individuals have remained leading the movement. And then there were other people who, through fatigue and stress and trauma, were not able to continue leading this kind of work. So what's been left at the end of that four-year process is a key group of survivor advocates internationally who've been working together in a very networked way, which is quite a flat structure, and we are all working towards trying to end abuse in gymnastics.

Everyone's been doing it in slightly different ways. Part of the art of what we do is trying to make space for lots of different approaches and for pluralism in the way that we organize and the way that we target and work with different stakeholders around the world. That main audience was always other survivors, with the goal that by speaking to other survivors, we could all start to make sense of what we'd experienced.

But depending on which territory we were in, different countries have handled the outpouring of discussion on abuse in gymnastics in different ways. In Canada, for example, they've been very effective at targeting the government and refusing the initial kinds of inquiries that were offered. They've been holding out for national inquiry, which would have the power to subpoena documents, and they don't have that yet. The consequence of holding out for that has meant that they've pulled in athletes from many, many other disciplines and sports.

Whereas in the UK, what we were offered was the White Review, which happened a bit earlier on. It was published two years ago. And when the White Review was initially set up, four years ago, there was a simultaneous process that was set up called the Independent Complaints Process. So here in the UK, a lot of our work has focused on challenging the Independent Complaints Process, which has been a very inadequate process that's not fit for purpose, and has caused a lot of trauma to those who've been co-opted into being involved in it.

Whereas, for example, in New Zealand, they already had much better-established systems for resolving community-based conflicts because of the relationship with the Native people in New Zealand. That was a lot more culturally built in, in the way that government works. It's much more accustomed already to listening to different community groups, and then involving them in the process of responding to key issues. So I would say that from territory to territory, everybody's organized themselves in the way that was most culturally appropriate to that country.

The stakeholders now differ. For example, stakeholders in Canada include the minister of sport. And there was a Royal Commission that happened in Canada, which was on, again, oppression of the Native people. So their stakeholders have been much more at the governmental level, whereas in the UK, the stakeholders that we're engaging with have been much more British Gymnastics themselves, a little bit with UK Sport, and then other nongovernmental agencies, like LimeCulture or the Ann Craft Trust, who work in the safeguarding space and have been commissioned by British Gymnastics to take part in some of the reform processes.

Now that we're four years in, it's only now that we're beginning to really engage with the International Federation of Gymnastics and the IOC. And one of the stakeholder organizations we've been engaging with is the Centre for Human Rights and Sports. They run a conference, and that was a very amazing space to be a part of. And through doing that, we got to meet Paulo David, who wrote a book in 2004 on human rights in youth sports. He has begun a process of codifying and laying out to us ways in which we could engage with the UN [United Nations] to essentially oversee some of the changes that are going on at a government level through the advocacy work that we and different members of the Gymnasts for Change International community try to make within their nation-states.

Journalists are huge stakeholders. No matter what country they're in, no one could have done what we've done without the support of journalists. And then in each nation, it depends from country to country how they've processed the complaints. In the UK, there's something called Sports Resolutions, which is an independent, nonlegal body who are there to arbitrate and try to sort out processes in a nonlegal way. They've been horrific. They've caused so many problems here in the UK. Another massive stakeholder is lawyers. And we've worked in the UK with lots of different law firms. There is a group legal action also in Canada. There's two in Australia, and then there's been individual cases here and there around Europe. Certainly in the UK, the lawyers have been invaluable, and a lot of them have been working on a pro bono basis. And that has come with challenges. I think those are the key stakeholders.

Alec Saelens: Have you taken inspiration from other organizations that do similar work?

Claire Heafford: Not really, I think because the issues of abuse in gymnastics are so specific. I myself had been an athlete in other sports as well. I retired from gymnastics at the age of 15 because of the abuse, and then I did weightlifting, and then I was in the British skeleton bob team for a little bit. So I was aware of the sorts of abuse issues that happen in other sports. And along the way, we've been contacted by other people who've been trying to tackle these issues in other sports. But we always tried to keep a real focus on gymnastics, because the cultural issues of abuse have always been woven into the fabric of what gymnastics is. Whereas, for example, for a 100-meter runner in athletics, there isn't really anything inherent about running the 100 meters that is abusive.

Abuse can happen along the way. An athlete can be vulnerable to abuse: abuses of power, sexual abuse, abuse from coaches, state-sponsored doping. There are all kinds of abuses that could happen to the athlete along the way, but it's not woven into what the sport is. Whereas gymnastics is really different in that way. It is similar to synchronized swimming or ice skating or ballet—any physical practice where you're being judged on your physical appearance, what we might call the aesthetic practices. Aesthetics is actually what you're being judged on as much as aptitude, and there are different ways in which that's being scored and measured. Reducing an athlete's value to a maximum point score of 15 inherently weaves in all kinds of mental health issues. So it's kind of a miracle if you can come out of gymnastics and not be damaged, whereas actually it's the flip reverse in most sports. It's unusual to be targeted and to be abused. Within gymnastics, the culture of abusive coaching is actually what was practiced, promoted, taught for so many years.

So the kinds of places I was taking inspiration from, I think partly comes from my own personal history, which is that I'm the granddaughter of a Methodist minister. I'm not religious myself, but I was raised in Methodist communities, which are flat structures. You have a minister that's providing leadership, but it's not like the Catholic Church, where that person's kind of special. It's just they do a certain role to provide some level of leadership. Probably a lot of our culture of working in flat structures with collaboration, with as many people as possible having a voice, and for the lawyers to be on the same level as the athletes who are speaking out—keeping all of that very flat—I think it comes, firstly, from that personal experience of being raised in those Church communities where that's how decision-making happens.

So when we work with lawyers, that can be quite challenging, because lawyers are all about the hierarchy. And I've struggled with that for the last four years, because it's always been quite hard

to challenge a hierarchy of lawyers, particularly in the UK, where the justice system is held in quite high regard. A lot of people really believe in the legal system, and they believe that the British justice system works. But I didn't really come to it with that idea. I didn't know anything about the law, so I came to it with a generalized criticality of knowing nothing, I guess. And again, it was the Methodist mentality of like, I don't really care if you're an ex-High Court judge. I somehow believe that I have a right to a voice. And therefore, I don't just assume you're right. I've gone on my gut the whole time.

And that's been really tough because I've had to challenge KCs [King's Counsels] where I've known the advice the KC was giving wasn't right. Or it has pushed me to the edge of my mental health, because I couldn't understand how I could know better than they could, and then they'd tell me, "You need to do it like this," and I'd know it wasn't right. And then I've nearly collapsed at multiple points in this four-year process in places where flat structures intersect with these much more hierarchical processes.

Actually, the people we've ended up looking at for inspiration, and would love to be talking to more, are, for example, Peter Tatchell in the UK, who was very involved in queer rights at that moment in time where the legislation didn't yet exist, and the social movement has come in to create legislation. The other day I [was learning about] an initiative 30 years ago of Black activists who were trying to create more Black MPs in the Labour Party. And when I saw that, I was like, oh, wow. That's a really incredible idea. They had these panels of Black speakers who would speak about issues that were affecting the Afro-Caribbean community in the UK and London, and then mentoring them so that they could become the future leaders. And one of those people is now an MP. It's all been about looking at activist groups.

In the UK, there's a couple of scandals at the moment, and there's one in particular that's given us a lot of hope, which is the Post Office scandal. We haven't had any contact with them, because they're all too busy still sorting it out. But the lawyers that we're now working with have just sorted out the compensation scheme for the postmasters. There was a TV show in the UK that came out at the beginning of the year, and that dramatization—not just press coverage, because journalists have been covering this topic for 10 years, but it was a drama-based show on ITV—that has just made this impossible now for the government to ignore. So the compensation scheme is now in place, and they're starting to sort it all out. And that's been really inspiring to see, that it's been 20 years for them, and we're only four years in. Then the other one that's huge in the UK at the moment is the infected blood scandal, in relation to AIDS.

Alec Saelens: We talked about some of the challenges that you're facing. Could you elaborate on what those challenges are?

Claire Heafford: The main challenge is actually convincing the public that there's a problem, because what the public buys into is this idea of the Olympics being brilliant. And every four years, the Olympics comes around and everybody buys into this idea that if you're going to take the status of becoming an Olympian, then you don't have the right to complain that you are being deprived of your human rights, because you're not human, you're superhuman. So you don't need to be protected in the same ways that we're all protected, because we have to get these images of your perfect body shoved down our throat 24/7 for our whole lives, and this is your moment of payoff for being regarded as superior and superhuman. So for a lot of people, they just don't think that this is an issue.

There's still a lot of parents out there who think the abuse is needed and necessary. So that's really challenging, and we saw that massively writ large when Simone Biles stepped back and said, It's not safe for me to do these movements. Gymnastics is dangerous, and I know I'm not landing stuff. And if I land it wrong, I might break my neck. I might die. Death is a real possibility here. And so I choose to not compete. The backlash that she got was global, and it then took her two, three years to get over how toxic people were to her about making that decision for her own safety. So people buy into this idea of the superhuman so much. That's the huge challenge that we still have, that we've got coaches who've been sanctioned and still don't think they've done anything wrong.

Yesterday I had a gymnast whose coach has been sanctioned via the Independent Complaints Process, and she herself has been using social media to talk about her experiences of abuse in gymnastics. And because she's been doing that, her coach has now reported her to British Gymnastics twice, and then went to the police this time. So she had to go under caution to be interviewed by the police in a case in which this girl is still the victim, and the coach is still saying, No, I'm the victim. British Gymnastics is now victimizing me. I've lost my job. This is out of order. So winning the public discussion is a challenge. And until that's won, the coaches will still think they have a right to say, well, I didn't do anything wrong anyway, even when they've been sanctioned.

The law is still a challenge in that the laws stop at the door of sport, and the law basically says, it's sport, so this law doesn't need to apply. So what we find is that the laws around child abuse as apply in school settings, you can't just map them over. It's not possible to get the same

outcomes, sanctions, convictions against coaches in the sporting system as you would against a teacher in the school system, and that's a crazy scenario.

Alec Saelens: In the face of all of these challenges, what have you been able to achieve?

Claire Heafford: The way that Paulo David has helped us to start thinking about this that we are like citizen activists, and that we're using civil society to organize and create change. I think one of the key things that we've done is that around the world, eight national governing bodies have done reviews into the sport, and they've all found the same thing. It's very compelling that the patterns are the same, and they show up around the world. So the evidence is now pretty compelling about what's been going on. And using the media has been absolutely essential and a very successful tool. It's the only thing that we can get national governing bodies to respond to. They hate bad press, and they tend to respond when we go to the press, but they don't respond in other contexts.

That includes lawyers. With the lawyers, they'll frustrate the process. They'll delay, make the legal process as long as it can possibly be, because there isn't really anything to make it go any faster. But bad publicity will make them come to the table overnight. The journalists that we work with are really, really key. We couldn't have done anything that we've done without those journalists.

And it's the organizing. It's strength. It's knowing that we know that we're telling the truth. Just being organized, sharing resources, creating strength in the networks, encouraging one another. It's been creating a positive feedback loop, where if somebody's spoken out and then we've come in to support them, and then somebody else has felt able to speak out, that creates a general positive feedback loop.

The next step in what we will be doing, in terms of [what's] being funded, is to create programs which educate people in how to do this kind of citizen-based activism, and hope that that inspires other survivor advocates to not only speak out about their abuse but also become survivor advocates in the system who do things to try to challenge the system.

And Paulo David's been great about inspiring us to say, don't underestimate what effect your work can have. Because for us, we're just in it, and we're challenging these processes all the time, and it can be really hard to feel like you're making progress. But we are now beginning to see British Gymnastics change policies, implement policies, and use different language. They are beginning to do some of the major things that we wanted, like put restrictions on training

hours. And I think by next year, we should be in a place where, actually, we'll be working with British Gymnastics, not necessarily in a public partnership, but behind the scenes. Our campaign work will be quite aligned in that they also understand where the law is limited and why they've not been able to get sanctions. So we'll both be campaigning for the same law changes and for an independent ombudsman, but we'll be coming at it from different places. And I think once we get onto that kind of work, that will become quite effective.

What British Gymnastics tried to do with us early on was co-opt to go on the inside, and one of the founders of Gymnasts for Change actually did. She took part in an athlete advisory panel, and she's been trying to change things from the inside. But really, we've still got all this power because I said, no, I'm not doing that. We're going to carry on with Gymnasts for Change, working from the outside. We don't want to lose our independence, because the minute that we do that, we can be co-opted inside the system. And it's really, BG are now recognizing how important it is that we have remained outside, and that we do have this power of a collective voice, and that we can now use that to help them change the system.

Alec Saelens: How do you navigate partnerships? How do you build trust with partners such as the UK gymnastics body?

Claire Heafford: It's been extremely stressful. Early on, when British Gymnastics started their Reform '25 process, which was their response to the White Review, they made all these unilateral decisions, and they said, oh, yes, we're working with stakeholders. They set up their gymnast advisory panel, a coach advisory panel, a clubs advisory panel, and they also made this role of the athlete representative, and then they appointed somebody to that role that we thought was completely inappropriate.

So they made a lot of unilateral decisions. And early on there were a lot of stressful meetings where they would say they were engaging, when really what they were doing was presenting a *fait accompli* to us. So we'd have a 60-minute meeting in the diary. They'd talk for 55 minutes and then say, "Do you want to say anything?" And I was like, "This is pointless. Don't waste my time."

Now I'm really glad that I had that reaction. At the time it made me really angry, and then I'd feel guilty for feeling angry and feel like my anger was not useful or not productive. But at a certain moment in time, one of the people that we were working with said something to me. She said, "You need to be more statesman-like." I was so upset by what she said. And then, eventually, I came out the other side of it, and I realized—that is not my job. I'm an activist, and my job is to

talk about my experiences as a survivor. This is not politics. I don't want to engage in this as politics. We will remain a campaign group, and we will remain speaking the truth. That's my job. And now that I'm CEO and I'm bringing other people from the campaign group to the table. I'll make space for someone else to be angry.

Their anger is legitimate. Of course they should be angry, and that anger needs to have a place. I need to legitimize their anger, tell them they're doing the right thing, tell them they should scream or cry or swear. Whatever they need to do in order to speak the truth is the right thing.

For example, we had a meeting with British Gymnastics where I took quite a lot of people. There were maybe seven representatives from Gymnasts for Change, and each one read an impact statement. And it was really hard for the CEO and the head of welfare to listen to the impact statements, and that meeting went quite badly in a way. They said some stuff which was quite rude, because we had a 19-year-old that did the crying and the anger and the screaming at them and challenging them. The CEO couldn't come back on her, so she came back on me. So I had to absorb that. That was really hard for me, and it took me a week to recover from that meeting because it was so emotional. For those people to read these impact statements, and then for the CEO and the head of welfare to not be able to match that level of emotion—they just responded in a really executive kind of way.

But two months later, we met them again, and they were completely different. So there's all these landscapes of emotion that have to be navigated. And a lot of what we have to do as a campaign group is actually to hold onto the fact that of course we should be angry. Of course we should be emotional. We are traumatized, so we shouldn't pretend that we're not traumatized. We shouldn't be expected to behave as though we're not traumatized, because we are, and accepting that is part of what engaging with us means.

I think slowly but surely, we're getting onto a better footing, and we are starting to understand that they haven't done enough. They haven't done it quickly enough, but there is some will to try to change the system. They don't want people to be abused. They also don't want to properly acknowledge what actually happened, but that's a legal issue. We're all still humans in the room at the end of the day, and they are also having an emotional reaction to what's going on. And I think having our own members turn on me and threaten me because they want more support is then quite helpful for me in understanding how the CEO might be experiencing being attacked publicly in the press, for example. I think we're getting to a place where now we're all humans in the room trying to be pragmatic whilst also bringing the emotions to the table.

Alec Saelens: What are the teachable lessons that you would share with people who are working in adjacent fields to help them do their work better? What are the things that you've learned from your work that you would impart to someone as guidance?

Claire Heafford: As a survivor, you are the expert in the room. And when you've been abused, the consequence of the abuse is usually that your self-worth is very, very low.

One of the frustrations we've had over the last four years is that the first thing that we did when we started Gymnasts for Change was deliver a document to British Gymnastics with 82 very well-thought-out points of policy that needed to be changed to make the sport safer, which we had group-sourced in this flat structure way. We'd run workshops, and we brought it all together. That document still stands up. And what they did with that document was pull it apart, essentialize some points, and then made these pathetic responses in little paragraphs that in no way addressed everything in that document. Four years on, I think what we can see is that they are actually using that document as their game plan for how they're changing the sport. They just never gave us credit for it.

I used to be frustrated, like, why are they not hearing us? And I still do get very frustrated with the lawyers when we say something and it feels like it's not being heard. So now, internally, with my deputy, what we talk about is remembering it's our jobs to just keep saying the same thing over and over and over. Just because they're not hearing it yet or haven't responded adequately to it yet doesn't mean that what we're saying isn't exactly spot-on correct. It's learning to hold your ground, and always remember that you're the expert in the room.

The other thing that was game-changing for me was, we were part of a film that was made last year by Pierre-Emmanuel Daurignac, and he kept saying, I had to go to this conference at the United Nations. I got on a plane and went to this conference, and the thing that I've heard Oak say over and over is that you have to look at who is not in the room, who is not being given a seat at the table. That's another indication of the expertise that's missing, and that's always the expertise that can be offered by survivors. You'd get a safeguarding panel, talking about what needs to change to make it safe, and there wouldn't be any survivors on the panel. So I would take it that that means that we don't have any value. And now, I see that the fact that there isn't a survivor on the panel is another example of how these people are not the experts, because if they were, they would have put a survivor on the panel. They would have recognized the survivor knows more. So bit by bit, I'm beginning to be more confident in that way.

The other big piece of advice would be that when you're a survivor, a lot of what experiencing abuse does is it messes with your boundaries, and the gaslighting can invert your sense of self. The abuse messes with people's senses of perception, and then they stop trusting themselves. People can become hypervigilant. And often, the perception is that they become quite conspiratorial, and they think that there's somehow a cover-up somewhere. And what I've learned through this process is that sometimes there is a bit of cover-up going on, but mostly it's just incompetency. That's a really big lesson, because four years ago, I'd have seen the incompetency, and I would have seen it as a potential area for where there's been some sort of cover-up, and I would have been angry that there was a lack of competency there. And all I could have felt was the anger. Whereas now, I see, actually, we do have to step out of that mode of being a victim in order to become activated as a citizen advocate. So it's just so essential that people understand that they've got the knowledge. They are the experts, but the only way you can use that expertise is to step out and become empowered.

A great piece of advice I've heard in the past is, don't wait to be given permission. But that's all well and good, especially if you've been abused. What's needed are armies of survivor advocates, who are the experts in the room. [They need to] understand they are the experts in the room and they need to feel empowered to start using their expertise and knowledge and lived experience. What's needed are programs on how to be a citizen activist and how to do that when you've been abused, and to be given permission. There needs to be a program that gives people permission to do this, and to take action, and to say to them, "You've got so much to contribute. You're filled with value. We need your knowledge." That needs to be done by the sports governing bodies themselves. And unfortunately, that's the one thing that they rarely do.

Going back to where we've taken inspiration from, I heard the former bishop of Liverpool was talking on the radio a few months ago about a process that he's been involved in, which was for victims of the Hillsborough disaster and their families. Instead of doing a public inquiry, they did a kind of citizen-organized process where he was approached by the victims and the victims' families to represent them. They said what their questions were, and they said what answers they were looking for, and they identified the people that they thought could provide the answers, and then an inquiry ensued. But the people who the inquiry was set up to support and to give answers to were also the people that set the terms. Often what happens is that you get safeguarding experts who've got no lived experience, and it ends up being the blind leading the blind. So if you really want to eliminate child sexual abuse, you've got to get sexual abuse survivors to help design the processes, to ask the right questions, to get the answers that are going to be helpful. And nobody ever does that.

With the lawyers, we're trying to make this same point at the moment with the Independent Complaints Process, like, who the hell wrote the protocol? Because it's not trauma-informed. And then when their own officers, who were going to be doing the interviews, said to the people that were overseeing the protocol, this is not trauma-informed, they were dismissed. So what we've got three years later is a bunch of outcomes that are unsatisfactory, a bunch of people that have been through the process that have been retraumatized. Nobody is happy on either side. The whole thing's been a royal waste of money.

BG themselves can't wait to see the end of the process. They've paid for it. They're furious. Everybody is angry, and all they had to do in the first place was work with the survivors to create the process that was going to sort it out in the first place. It's quite simple, really. It's just amazing, the arrogance. I think that's what's really amazed me: understanding the privilege of people that are not abused. I guess in a way, I've ended up feeling sorry for a lot of the people that are in charge of making the decisions, including the KCs involved, because, actually, the arrogance of these people to think that they can impose a resolution system on the people who've had the lived experience in the first place is astonishing.

We don't have all the answers. I'm an artist by trade. So a lot of our approach is like an artist experiment, right? We just try a bunch of stuff, and then we look out for people along the way that seem to know what they're talking about, and we are trying to assimilate a structure. We'll try something. Maybe it works. Maybe it doesn't work, and it doesn't matter if it works or doesn't work, because either way, structure has to be put on top in order to make it work properly.

Alec Saelens: Thank you so much, Claire.

Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*