“Leaders need to feel that if they don’t act, the cost will be high:” Daniela Ligiero of Together for Girls on survivor-led political activism and holding decision-makers accountable to act.

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Can you introduce yourself and describe the problem you're addressing with the work that you're doing?

Daniela Ligiero: I'm Daniela Ligiero, CEO of Together for Girls, and founder of the Brave Movement, a survivor-led initiative within Together for Girls. We focus on ending violence against children, especially sexual violence. Our work aligns with the To Zero campaign, and I’ve been involved with To Zero since the beginning. The problem we address is child sexual violence, which is a massive global issue. At Together for Girls, we contribute a few pieces to the puzzle, and the To Zero roadmap outlines various pieces. We have four special initiatives that address this problem from different perspectives.

The first initiative is Data to Action. We support national governments, with support from CDC, to conduct large population-based surveys, interviewing children, adolescents, and youth at a national level to understand the size of the problem, risk factors, and consequences. These surveys, called VACS [Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys], have been conducted in 24 countries, covering 13% of the world’s population under 24. This data is the largest source on violence against children and sexual violence. It’s critical data set, that together with other studies, allowed us to get the statistic that one in five girls and one in seven boys experience sexual violence.

The second initiative focuses on solutions and evidence. After understanding the problem, we look at what works. The Safe Futures Hub: Solutions to End Childhood Sexual Violence is a partnership with the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) and WeProtect Global Alliance. It centralizes research and evidence on effective solutions to address sexual violence. The Hub provides a standardized way of assessing evidence, allowing people to check the latest

research to see what works–looking at both academically rigorous data and practice-based knowledge.

The third initiative is the Brave Movement. We believe that understanding the problem and having solutions is not enough. We need political pressure to act. Brave is a survivor-centered movement that amplifies the voices of survivors and allies, advocating for global, regional, and national action. Brave has worked on initiatives with the G7, European Union, and African Union and established national hubs in multiple countries. We use demonstrations, events, and campaigns to push leaders to act.

Finally, we have the Out of the Shadows Index, which we recently took over from Ignite Philanthropy and The Economist. This index ranks countries on their progress in addressing child sexual violence, offering a tool for accountability. We will release a new version of the index at the end of this year. In summary, our approach addresses the size of the problem, identifies solutions, promotes political activism, and provides an accountability tool. Our audience varies depending on the initiative—sometimes policymakers, sometimes the public, and sometimes survivors.

Sanne Breimer: I want to focus on the Brave Movement, specifically on the political actions you take to galvanize activism and engage governments. Do you have an example of something that had a lot of impact, and how do you measure the impact of these actions?

Daniela Ligiero: At a global level, one of the things we've been doing is working on the elimination of something called statutes of limitation, which means that countries have different laws about how long after that crime has been committed you can press charges or you could go to court and try to get some accountability for that crime.

Brave currently has three global campaigns, and at the regional and national levels, groups can add their own priorities based on their context. Unfortunately, many countries have statutes that set limits of 10, 15, or even 20 years after the crime. After that period, you can no longer press charges. What we know from child sexual abuse is that, on average, it takes 20 to 30 years for someone to publicly acknowledge the abuse and feel ready to go to court.

I'm a public survivor, and I've been sharing my own experience for many years. I know firsthand that it's a very big step to speak out. It's one thing to share your story with family or trusted individuals, but being publicly open about it, especially in the media, can be traumatic due to the stigma and shame still surrounding it. People who go public are often attacked online. We've found that in countries with no statutes of limitation, where victims can bring their case forward at any time, even if there's no evidence left, the response is overwhelming. When these statutes are abolished, many cases come forward, holding institutions accountable.

For example, in the U.S., there's been a movement to abolish statutes of limitation. While it hasn't been fully achieved at the national level, it's happening at the state level. In states where this change has occurred, we've seen massive cases against the Catholic Church and the Boy Scouts. In one instance, over 82,000 men came forward, and as a result, some jurisdictions had to declare bankruptcy, like the Boy Scouts in the U.S., due to the overwhelming number of cases.

Currently, we have a major campaign on abolishing statutes of limitation (SOL), focusing on the European Union. Because of our efforts, the European Union now has a special directive that will

be voted on at the end of the year to abolish statutes of limitation across Europe. This campaign has been a three-year process, working with the Council of Europe and member states. We're excited and hopeful that we will succeed because some EU countries have terrible laws when it comes to protecting survivors, while others have better ones.

Sanne Breimer: Could you tell me a little bit more about a specific campaign? What are you focusing on within that campaign?

Daniela Ligiero: We also have a campaign on online safety, but let me stick to the SOL example and Europe. THis is a multi-pronged effort. First and foremost, we have research that we've done, which I can send to you or you can find on our website. There's a report called *Justice Unleashed*, where we ranked every country in Europe. We use a standardized process and give countries a grade, as some have higher or lower age limits, or different rules for civil or criminal cases. It's complex, so we grade each country from A to F, or with percentages like 90%, 80%, 70%, like in school. Every country is graded.

We've launched this report with journalists and held multiple events at the European Union, both public-facing and private. We bring survivors from the countries to share what it's like to not have their day in court. We have an active member representing Brave on the Council of Europe, Matthew McVarish, who's been an advocate for eliminating statutes of limitation.

Brave was the first survivor group with representation on the Council of Europe. For a few years now, we have attended all the meetings and do behind-the-scenes advocacy with member states, both on the Council of Europe and in the European Parliament. Recently, we held a behind-the-scenes closed-door event with EU leadership, where we brought survivors to speak on this issue. We also recently launched a global campaign with ECPAT focused on statutes of limitation reform. It includes videos about how justice shouldn't have a zip code—justice should be available no matter where you live. This campaign went out two months ago.

Our strategy includes a mix of closed events, political engagement, and open campaigns with journalists. It's a large, multi-faceted strategy. We have an advocacy group in Brussels, survivors from multiple countries engaging with us, and communications experts helping with the messaging. Public-facing campaigns, with survivors speaking out to journalists, are key. I have pictures of survivors standing outside the European Union, holding signs. We also do behind-the-scenes advocacy, with a firm of lobbyists we've hired who work in the EU to arrange individual meetings with members of parliament from different countries. It's a combination of both public-facing and behind-the-scenes efforts.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say is something that isn't working in this context, and what have you learned from that that you may not have done before?

Daniela Ligiero: Campaigning is expensive. Good campaigning takes time, requires a lot of expertise, and costs resources. I see many people in our sector who do a video, post it online, and have a signup. Yes, that's a campaign, but it won't be effective. You need communications expertise, advocacy expertise, and strategy all coming together. You need external and internal efforts, and behind-the-scenes work, constantly mapping everything.

We have a private mapping of member states that are against the issue of abolishing SOL. But there are big scandals and that can be an entry point to get traction. For example, there have

been all these scandals in France, with this doctor, Joël Le Scouarnec, who is accused of raping 299 people–most of them children. I'm sure you've been following it. We're using that opportunity to push France and say, 'See? These people couldn't bring their cases against this doctor because the statutes had expired. This is why you should change it.' Most of the people trying to get this doctor into jail can't anymore because it's been too long. That's one example.

The lesson here is that campaigning is a much bigger endeavor than people in our sector realize. It requires resources, which is tough because funders often don't understand that and don't want to fund it.

Sanne Breimer: Do you think it's different by country and culturally how a campaign lands and how the problem is framed?

Daniela Ligiero: Yes, that's part of the political mapping. What resonates with more conservative audiences doesn't necessarily resonate with more liberal ones. And countries are different. There may be common messaging, but you also have to adapt. The other campaign we've been running is on online safety. Surprisingly, the opposition there is more left-leaning. It makes no sense, but when we try to address online child sexual abuse, they frame our efforts as extreme right, invading privacy, and against personal freedoms. You need to understand that this is a false narrative–that you have to pick between personal freedcom and protecting children from the most horrid sexual violence crimes–and somethign a lot of tech companies don't want because they don't want to be regulated. It's been challenging. You have to know who your audience is, who your opposition is, and how they will try to counter you.

Sanne Breimer: Are you saying that some tech companies are deliberately working against your online safety campaign?

Daniela Ligiero: Yes. We have research that shows this, and we've done a lot of work in Europe on this issue. There's legislation we've been trying to push, but it keeps being delayed for a vote. Unfortunately, we weren't able to get it passed in the last parliament, and now there's a new group in place because of the elections. It's comprehensive, fantastic legislation to make the internet safer for children. Last year alone, the big tech lobby spent over $50 million in lobbying the EU.

Most tech companies don't want any restrictions or regulation. The main framing has been around privacy. They're funding all these groups talking about privacy, saying, 'If you start regulating child sexual abuse, you're infringing on people's privacy. If you frame it that way, it sounds like, 'Yes, I don't want people invading my privacy,' and it makes it seem very authoritarian, like the state controlling me. It's nuanced. We have to explain that there are ways to maintain privacy, but what about the privacy of the people whose images are being shared? There are ways to remove those, and we should be able to do that.

Sanne Breimer: What are the main challenges that you are currently facing aside from funding?

Daniela Ligiero: Funding and several challenges. In low and middle-income countries, with cuts to foreign assistance, not just from the US but as a global trend, it's been accelerating. Now the UK is pulling back further, the Netherlands announced more cuts, the European Union, Sweden—everyone is cutting foreign assistance. These huge gaps in low and middle-income countries worry me. For example, governments now have to decide between investing in

preventing and responding to child sexual violence or providing HIV medications to save lives. That's the reality. I think this will be a big challenge moving forward, especially in these settings.

We were starting to make progress, and there was more attention to this issue, but I'm afraid we'll see a significant fallback. We must frame this agenda as one that should not be secondary, but a real investment in children for their long-term well-being, economic productivity, and the wealth of countries. That's how we'll have to approach this, framing it in a new way.

Finance ministers will be faced with the dilemma of losing foreign aid—the U.S. alone is cutting over $70 Billion. In Kenya, for example, U.S. foreign aid covered medications and other needs. Now they'll have to make up for it. They might see our agenda as expendable, and that's the challenge. We have to frame it as a real investment in children's well-being, mental health, and economic productivity. If you invest now, later on, you'll spend less on other issues like unintended pregnancies, mental health, and sexual reproductive health. We need to make that case, especially as the gaps are widening.

Sanne Breimer: Do you think there will be a shift in the funding landscape, with new parties stepping in to take on the funding cuts, like the USAID reduction?

Daniela Ligiero: I think the gap will be impossible to fill because of the scale. The U.S. government has cut over $70 billion per year in funding, and the UK has announced a $13 billion reduction over the next few years. Philanthropy doesn't have that kind of funding. What we're likely to see are gaps. What I hope for is more mobilization around efficiencies and effectiveness, where philanthropy, private capital, and domestic financing come together to target the most critical areas for investment. To be clear, it's not a matter of someone stepping in to fill the hole. It's a deep structural shift that's going to happen.

Sanne Breimer: What role do they play in pushing your work forward? Also, who are your main partners, and what strategies do you use to maintain these in a way that benefits your work?

Daniela Ligiero: Together for Girls is all about partnership. It's in our DNA. Our tagline is 'Strength in Numbers,' because in all of our initiatives, we bring together groups of people. In Brave, it's survivor leaders from around the world who are already doing their work, but often alone—our goal is to make them part of something bigger. In the data piece, we don't do the research ourselves; we bring together governments, the CDC, UNICEF, and other partners to conduct these national surveys. Our strategy is always to unite actors, sectors, and individuals around a common project and approach. We believe the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. You can achieve things together that no single organization can do alone. We see it as essential, and I think, in today's world, it will only become more essential. We bring people together. For each of our four initiatives, we work with very different partners.

Sanne Breimer: As an organization that mediates between others, it must be very challenging. How do you approach that? Do you start by building a foundation of shared values, or is there another process you follow?

Daniela Ligiero: To build successful partnerships, you need a common vision and shared values. It's almost like a Venn diagram where you find what's in the middle. It takes work to bring people together and figure that out. The way we approach it is that we come in with something already somewhat shaped, not starting from scratch.

Brave is a good example. We knew we wanted a survivor-centered movement focused on ending childhood sexual violence and prioritizing advocacy for policy and legal change, not focused on specific groups like the Catholic Church. We set some parameters and then bring together the leaders and people who want to work on it.

Within that, there's space to shape the strategy together. We have what I call 'the box'—what's inside and outside. What's inside the box, we can create together, but we already have some parameters. It's important to come with a low ego and a real sense of elevating everyone else's work. It's about supporting the movement, not promoting yourself. We aim to bring on people who think that way, who are focused on elevating others and not trying to make it about themselves. The cause needs to come first.

People can tell when you're doing something just to get money or visibility for your organization. Sometimes what's good for the cause isn't necessarily good for your organization. Being able to step back and say. It's about being driven by the cause, not self-interest.

Sanne Breimer: What advice would you give to someone who wants to do similar work?

Daniela Ligiero: Be patient. Things take time. It's a process.

Sanne Breimer: What you were saying in the beginning about the EU legislation now actually coming through in a vote after three years—there's this patience coming in.

Daniela Ligiero: Absolutely. When you're trying to create big changes, you need time. If you're doing something small, yes, you can move quickly, but changing a law is a big deal—and it's lasting. If we can change the law in the EU, that's huge. It will affect millions of kids and survivors. So, be patient. There's something about self-care and collective care. With the funding challenges ahead, we all need to brace ourselves a bit, but the key is: don't give up. Take care of yourself in the process because this is a marathon, not a sprint. I've seen a lot of people burn out, especially those doing survivor work. It's incredibly hard, with a lot of trauma and pain. That's why leaning into collective care and self-care is so important

Sanne Breimer: How is that? Is that organized at the moment? Do you organize within your organization initiatives of collective care?

Daniela Ligiero: It doesn't exist for the sector, but for our organization. We have a mental health professional on retainer for our staff, available anytime they need it. We also have many protocols around self-care and collective care. It would be amazing to have a service like that available for all partners in a larger coalition, but we have to pay for it ourselves. So, while it doesn't exist right now, that would be incredible to provide.

Sanne Breimer: A little more about the political part of it. You also work a lot with governments. What is one thing they don't understand yet about this topic?

Daniela Ligiero: A few decades ago, there was this belief that 'Oh, this only happens in a few places, every once in a while, or far away—not that much.' Now, from all the data, we know that one in five and one in seven is a lot.

This is happening everywhere. The issue is that we haven't been talking about it. People aren't coming forward due to stigma and shame. Now, we understand this better, but the challenge is

overcoming the belief that 'There's nothing we can do about it. It's just that way. It's a private matter.' It's not. We now have all this research showing there's a lot we can do to make a difference, and the state has a responsibility.

It's not just a family responsibility; it's a state responsibility. It's like we did with violence against women. A decade or two ago, that was seen as a family matter, a private issue, but now most places recognize that the state must step in. We haven't reached that point with child sexual violence yet, but we will.

Sanne Breimer: How do you view the role of media in that context?

Daniela Ligiero: Media is essential. We need to break stigma, remove barriers, and highlight solutions. That won't happen through just one effort—it requires multiple approaches. We've seen in other issues how the media can play a huge role in bringing attention.

One of my biggest criticisms of the media is how the issue is covered. There was a study, I think four years ago, funded by the Oak Foundation, that showed the coverage in newspapers was mostly sensationalist. It was either about something horrible happening or a trial about it. For example, take the doctor in France. Even today, the story is about how this doctor abused over 200 kids. It's a sad, sensationalized story, but the real issue is: if we had created proper reporting mechanisms, investigated reports seriously, and trained parents and children to talk about it, this could have been prevented. That doesn't happen.

Sanne Breimer: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact on the field in the next five years? What do you see as the key leverage points for action?

Daniela Ligiero: This is why I started Brave three years ago. I kept thinking someone else would do it, but no one did. So I decided to take action. I believe that unless we have an outcry from people marching in the streets, speaking out, there won't be the political pressure to act. Right now, that doesn't exist.

We often talk about the cost of action, but the cost of inaction today is zero. Politicians aren't doing anything because there's no consequence. Leaders need to feel that if they don't act, the cost will be high. They need to be criticized in the media, have people at their doorstep—then they'll act. We don't have that yet, and that's crucial.

Sanne Breimer: How big the issue is and the lack of outcry about it. Is there a successful example, a government-led initiative that has worked, and that is a constructive approach?

Daniela Ligiero: We have a really good example from Kenya, and I like to use a low-income country example because there's this belief that only rich countries can do this. We conduct large population-based surveys, and in 2011, we did one in Kenya. We repeated it about 10 years later. We were able to show that in a decade of work, the number of children—boys and girls—who experienced sexual harassment went down significantly. This meant four million fewer children experienced sexual violence, which is huge.

After the survey, we worked with the national government to develop a national action plan, which included several initiatives. It wasn't just one thing. We also did a follow-up study to understand what made a difference. While this was a qualitative interview and not a randomized

controlled trial, it provided valuable insights. We saw that Kenya started introducing training at police stations and for judges. They also did more work in schools, educating kids and teachers about their bodies, consent, and other important topics. Parenting programs were tested, among other things. These efforts likely contributed to the decrease in cases. That's amazing, four million fewer children.

Prevention is hard to prove, but this is a concrete example of what can be achieved even in a resource-constrained setting. If you go to our website and click on Kenya, you can see all the details.

Sanne Breimer: You take data from two points over some time, then do a more in-depth study to explain the changes that were made?

Daniela Ligiero: We're just starting to reach that point. These surveys have only existed for about 15 years, so in the grand scheme of things, it's not a lot of time. We're only now starting to repeat them. They're large and expensive, so it's not something you do every year. Surveys like DHS need to be done over periods to capture the big picture and provide representative data. We just finished the second survey in Tanzania and saw similar drops. Now, we're starting the same process to understand what changed

Sanne Breimer: Is there a reason it's both African countries that you're doing the research for?

Daniela Ligiero: Yes, the VACS surveys have primarily been conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa. We've also done them in a few Latin American countries and Cambodia, but the focus has mainly been on Sub-Saharan Africa. The unfortunate news is that this was primarily funded by the US government, and with those funds now cut, Tanzania will be our last VACS. It's sad because, unless someone steps in to continue funding, we won't be able to conduct more.

Sanne Breimer: Is there anything else we should mention that we haven't talked about yet?

Daniela Ligiero: Yes, the fact that you're interviewing me right now is significant. I think we're at a structural change moment for the world and our sector, especially in many of the countries where we want to work. I know To Zero is global, so that's something important to consider. It will require us to be creative, form partnerships, and think through how to continue advancing. I believe there's an opportunity for To Zero to contribute to this in ways that might not have come through in the interviews or in the document that was just launched. I hope To Zero will consider this moving forward.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much for your time.

Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonization through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training,

Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*