“Focus on the importance of engaging people with lived experience”: Joanna Maranhão of Sport & Rights Alliance on centering survivor voices, intersectionality, and how to compel international sports governing bodies to address sexual violence.

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Could you please introduce yourself and describe the problem you're addressing, specifically how you brought attention to the issue and your intended audience?

Joanna Maranhão: My name is Joanna Maranhão. I am a former professional swimmer and Olympian from Brazil, currently based in Germany with my family. I am a survivor of sexual abuse in sports. I participated in four editions of the Olympic Games, and I remember what happened to me when I was nine, right after my first Olympic participation. Since then, I’ve navigated being an elite athlete, trying to be the best in the world, while navigating such a horrific trauma.

I'm a researcher and an advocate for safe sports, and committed to ending childhood sexual violence globally. My current work is in the sports industry. The understanding that sports carry an associated risk due to the *win-at-all-cost* mentality and *no pain, no gain*, leads us to normalize behaviors that might escalate to sexual violence. I also focus on the importance of engaging people with lived experience. Not everyone identifies as a survivor. If we're looking towards solutions in the sporting ecosystem, we need to engage these people in decision-making.

I work for the Sport & Rights Alliance, a coalition of organizations that fight for human rights in and through sports. I coordinate the international network of people with lived experience of abuse in sports. We try to amplify their voices and provide emergency funds. We do advocacy campaigns and work behind doors with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), and Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). In our theory of change, if we get to a stage where those big sports governing bodies implement the best practices, there will be a snowball effect on the National Olympic Committees (NOC) and International Sports Federations (IFs).

Sanne Breimer: Could you share an example that illustrates the impacts of your work at the moment? And how do you know it was working?

Joanna Maranhão: It goes back to 2008 versus where we're standing. When I finally disclosed my story back in Brazil, there was no system in place and I was thrown to the wolves. Usually when an athlete, or when someone in a sport verbalizes that he or she has suffered sexual violence or any interpersonal violence in a sport, we are faced with retaliation, victim blaming, and silencing. That was not different in my case.

I was sued by the perpetrator, together with the other victims. I was angry and it took me long to speak about it, and then I was retraumatized. I was invited to the Senate in Brazil to lift the statute of limitation. I was 21, and the statute was 18 years old in Brazil, which is horrific.

I started advocating to lift the statutes of limitations in my country. Now, victims have double the amount of time and the law carries my name. That was the first time I thought, "If there is a reason why I went through all of this, maybe this is it." Since then, I used the platform I was given to show people that it's not easy being an elite athlete while navigating your trauma. I'm humanizing this space, showing that it is possible. I became very open about my vulnerability, panic attacks, anxiety, distress, and ups and downs in my career. This is me being as transparent as I can be, trying to be an elite athlete while dealing with something inflicted upon me and I didn't have a choice.

It gave me the platform to be where I am today. As a sports ethicist and researcher, I did a prevalence study measuring the extent to which Brazilian athletes are exposed to psychological, physical, and sexual violence. The study found that sexual violence was at 63%. It's higher than similar research in any other country.

Within the Sport & Rights Alliance, my lived experience is important, but it shouldn't be just that. We should be grounded in research, evidence-based, and proactive. I use my platform to say to sports governing bodies, "You are not getting it right because of this, this, and that. And that's what science says. That's where the best practices are. And here are the people with lived experience who want to be part of the solution. And if you want to build something legitimate, you need these people working with you." It isn't just me, it's a group of people.

Sanne Breimer: Do you have an example of something concrete you would like to get out of it?

Joanna Maranhão: The IOC regulates the Olympic movement and is the highest sports governing body. When tackling abuse in sports, we hear from sports governing bodies, "We're going to work in prevention." I always say, "You cannot look into the future without having a reconciliation with the past. You can't leave those people behind and alone. You have to do something and you also need to respond. You need to have a better investigation system and provide a remedy."

I'm a big advocate for remedy; seeing a remedy as both a process and an outcome. We've been vocal about the IOC's responsibility to provide a remedy to affected people. Last year, IOC president, Thomas Bach, announced 10 million euros for a four-year period to provide remedies for people affected by abuse in sports.

I was invited to sit at the working group that was trying to come up with a concept note on what that might look like. It was not easy to sit at a table with powerful people, like representatives from FIFA and huge International Sports Federations (IFs), and hear myself say to them, "This money cannot go to you. It needs to be provided to services for survivors. You need to serve the people that you should be serving."

In the end, we convinced them to have hubs in every region that will provide different sources of remedies, like psychological aid, legal aid, and capacity building. I've also advocated that it shouldn't start in Europe or in North America, that we should start from the margin. The first one's going to be in Africa, and then the second one's going to be in the Pacific Islands.

So far, it's a pilot project, but it's something that I felt like, "They heard us." However, 10 million for four years is not enough. If you look at anti-doping for instance, they have 21 million a year. We have 10 million for four years with something that is way more complex than taking a substance or not, but we are moving forward. The hub model has a lot of potential to provide remedy to survivors.

Sanne Breimer: Why is it important to start from the margins?

Joanna Maranhão: Anyone can be affected by abuse in sports. It can be this place where you suffer violence, but it can also be a safe space. Many people come to sports because they are suffering violence inside their families or in school.

In the prevalence research, we find that the most severe types of violence, like attempted rape, severe physical harm, are perpetrated by the coach, the manager, or someone in a position of authority. When looking into associated factors, people of color, LGBTQ and disabled people, women, and women of color, are more prone to suffer those types of violence. From an

advocacy lens, what happened in the USA gymnastics was horrible, but to some extent, they had more of a platform than if you look at cases in Mali and India.

Overall, survivors are underrepresented, but some are even more. If you accommodate the needs of the most vulnerable as a consequence in the long term, you're going to be accommodating the needs of everyone. If you start from Central Europe or the United States, it's hard in the long term to accommodate the needs of the people who are silenced because you don't know what they need.

Sanne Breimer: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as from things that do. Can you describe something that you tried but didn't work, but did teach you a valuable lesson?

Joanna Maranhão: 10 years ago, I was way angrier than I am today because my integrity was violated and it was the sports governing bodies in my country who didn't do what they should do, which is provide comfort for me, listen to me and provide a safe space. The stage of my healing journey that I am at now is that I'm still angry because it drives me to keep going. I know where to put those feelings to be more proactive.

In passing bills and legislation, we should lobby with those who disagree. To pass the legislation in Brazil, I partnered with this right-wing Senator back in 2009, which was hard because I'm a proud left-wing woman. But I thought, “The people who think like me will already vote for the bill. I need this man to convince those who do not agree with me and they will not listen to me because of my political inclinations.” That was the right move. I don’t have anything in common with that Senator, but he was important for me to pass the bill.

Sanne Breimer: I can imagine. Someone like him might also be harder to convince instead of teaming up with those already on your side.

Joanna Maranhão: I had to give up the terminology thing. I said to him, “Maybe we should use the right terminology, like sexual abuse. We're not against pedophiles because someone can be a pedophile and not be an abuser and it's hard for people to see.” And then he said, "No, no, no, the t-shirt is going to say, ‘everyone against pedophilia.’" I’m like, “Whatever, you wear the t-shirt." I told him, "You do you. Let's keep trying to convince these people to vote for the legislation."

Sanne Breimer: Besides funding, what are the main challenges you faced, and currently face?

Joanna Maranhão: The network is growing and we are making it happen, but sometimes we have to take four months in a year just to focus on fundraising when we should be getting things going. I would love to have an expert do the fundraising. [That way my] team could focus on the work and what we're good at.

Going up against powerful institutions is scary, and that sits differently with survivors. We just launched a campaign before the Paris Olympics where we asked the IOC to improve their hotline. Currently, their hotline is an online form in English, where they signpost back to the International Sports Federations. It's not fit for its purpose and not even close to what good practices are. I was scared because we were going after the IOC. If we were retaliated [against], that would be bad for us. It's always a risk, but it takes years when you do advocacy behind closed doors saying, "This is not good, can you improve it?" You need to be vocal.

Navigating that is a challenge. I speak to good allies working within those sports governing bodies in advance saying, "This is coming. Just so you know, this is what we're doing. I'm not attacking you. I'm attacking the system because I want to improve the system." So far it has worked, but we are a coalition. Some people go all in and bash the sports governing body. Some are like, "No, we shouldn't."

Sanne Breimer: Is shifting cultural norms also part of the work that you're doing? If so, what strategies or solutions are most effective at shifting society's view of the problem?

Joanna Maranhão: What comes to my mind is when we were building the network, we built the least hierarchical model because we are questioning and challenging the status quo from sports governing bodies that have this top-bottom approach, where they make the decisions and the athletes just shut up and do what they need to do. We cannot build a network and then replicate that model. We have a linear structure with an advisory council composed of people with lived experience. Those who experienced different types of violence, and are at different stages of their healing journey. From Mali, Argentina, the United States, Singapore, and me from Brazil.

The first thing we did was create the Community Agreements, housekeeping rules that have helped us to go back and understand that we have to provide a safe space before we do anything. Our healing journey is important in doing the work. It’s a beautiful and powerful document that we're using for anything we do, and when people become network members, they need to comply with the Community Agreements. It's acknowledging intention versus impact and it has helped with the cultural norms. We've heard from our core partners and other organizations that liked the Community Agreements. They apply it to their work. That's what we want. If this is a best practice, please take it, adapt it, and spread it around!

One thing that we also do within the network is translate everything that we do. We want to be global and have a margins approach. On our website, the statements are translated into Portuguese, Spanish, and French. We reported on the Indian wrestler's case, a case of a couple of athletes fighting for justice, and the report is translated into Hindi. We provide interpretation when we do our work.

Sanne Breimer: When you mentioned language, in the context of changing cultural norms, do you educate people in certain uses of language?

Joanna Maranhão: We work with translators and have an internal glossary with the terms in English, Portuguese, Spanish, and French. And then we have discussions, because sometimes “safeguarding” is not a word that makes sense in Portuguese. I use “safe sport”. Similarly, how do you explain what “trauma-informed” means? Whenever we bring that in a webinar or a report, we explain the concept so people can define it as they want.

Sanne Breimer: What role do partnerships or coalitions play in pushing your work forward, if any? Who are your main partners and how do you cultivate and maintain the partnerships?

Joanna Maranhão: We are survivor-informed and a survivor-led group of people. Being shielded by the Sport & Rights Alliance, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, and the Army of Survivors, gives us comfort. It's not me, Joanna, at the forefront. It's this army of people committed to the same cause. One example of this co-creative and collaborative work is the statement we released before the Paris Olympic Games against the participation of the Dutch volleyball player. And I must say it's not against him, he had the support that perpetrators should have. It's the unbalance of the support that the IOC, and sports governing bodies, do not provide to victims of violence in sports.

We went through his specific case eligibility criteria to create a statement. Together with two advocacy groups in our network, Kyniska Advocacy in the UK, and The Army of Survivors in the US we discussed the language and what we wanted to say. We shared it with the Advisory Council members. It was a powerful collective survivor statement.

Sanne Breimer: What insights or teachable lessons can be taken from your work that someone who wants to have a similar impact or do similar work could learn from?

Joanna Maranhão: Engaging people with lived experience throughout the process and giving them the power to decide how they want to collaborate and participate is important. Some people want to be at the forefront and vocal all the time. Others just want to participate behind doors. This is all part of dealing with trauma and all of this should be acknowledged.

Whenever I feel distressed with anxiety and I have to do a keynote speech, I just say, "I'm not feeling well today. I'm sorry, I'm not going to do it." We should embrace vulnerability and see this as strength from people who work with us, and accommodate it.

It's super important to learn from the people who are already doing the work. For example, people from the clergy who are trying to fight abuse in the church. It's similar to the sports ecosystem because they make their own rules. There is a hierarchy, retaliation, and silencing.

There are a lot of good best practices for changing the culture. We need it in sports because there is no evidence that if you abuse someone mentally and psychologically, that person is

going to perform better. Science says otherwise, but that's still very strong in sports. What are the best ways to shift that culture to advocate for a compassionate coaching style and humanize athletes from grassroots to elite sports? That would be something interesting to learn from people working outside sports.

Sanne Breimer: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact on the field of this topic in the next five years?

Joanna Maranhão: We don't need to replicate what the anti-doping movement is doing, but we need the resources that the anti-doping movement has. We also need an international framework that we don't have at the moment. Regarding the Dutch volleyball player's situation, the Dutch NOC has the autonomy to do whatever it wants, and the IOC doesn't have the autonomy because there is no document saying what you should and shouldn't do.

We need a framework from the IOC, enforced by the IOC, on dos and don'ts, that National Olympic Committees and International Sports Federations need to comply with. We have the member states who fund sports, we need UNESCO or someone to do a convention like in anti-doping. I'm not saying that documents solve the problem, but from an overall perspective in five years, I would love to see that happening.

Sanne Breimer: What would it take to get businesses, communities, and institutions to care about the issues you work on and to make them feel responsible?

Joanna Maranhão: Everyone plays sports. That needs to be an environment that is safe from harm. It goes outside the elite sports bubble towards the human rights to participate and not just play sports, but also attend and watch sports. We're talking about people watching sports and playing, the referees and parents. It applies to everyone.

Sanne Breimer: What does it take for them to get on board? Maybe sports clubs in amateur fields or even municipalities.

Joanna Maranhão: An international framework helps because once you have a document on what you should do to play or provide sports, there is minimal stuff to have in place. A framework is a document with limitations, but at least it's something. You cannot compete, for instance, if you don't have a national anti-doping agency. That's the power a framework has.

Sanne Breimer: Is it the same for getting governments involved, would you say?

Joanna Maranhão: Yes, in that case, we would need a convention, not a code. In the same format, ministers sit down and discuss article by article, what works for them, and what doesn't work. If they don't have the resources to apply what is needed, then there has to be funding. If you look at the UNESCO website, they fund small countries' anti-doping agencies doing what

they need to do to be eligible.

Sanne Breimer: What are the limitations toward addressing the issue in your sector?

Joanna Maranhão: Each sport is so specific. My husband was a judoka. If you grab the kimono and do a tourniquet, you'll be disqualified, DQed. In my sport, swimming, if you pass the 15-meter mark underwater, you're going to get DQed. There's no way that the IOC will make rules for each sport, they'll give the autonomy for each federation to make its own rules.

However, those rules should be given this autonomy solely pertaining to the rules of the game, not regarding safe sport and human rights. That's not something that you're going to discuss. We should move towards supervised autonomy. You have autonomy when it comes to focusing on the rules of the game, but for the other parts, you don't have autonomy.

Sanne Breimer: Are there actually already umbrella rules for all in some sports?

Joanna Maranhão: If you look into the Olympic Charter, there is one article related to safe sport; very vague and that's one line. It's not enough. For someone to compete at the Olympic Games, they need to comply with the Olympic Charter, the water code, the anti-doping code, and the code against sports manipulation. There's no code or convention with regards to violence or sexual violence and psychological, physical and sexual violence. Our proposition is either amendments at the Olympic Charter adding language or to create a new document addressing this. They need to comply with that as well.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you for your time today, Joanna.

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 decolonisation 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.*