“Impunity leads to silence”: Mary Harvey of the Centre for Sport and Human Rights on working with international sport regulating bodies and host governments to ensure they safeguard human rights.

Rollo Romig

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Rollo Romig: Could you start off by introducing yourself and giving me an overview of what your work has been?

Mary Harvey: My name's Mary Harvey. I'm the chief executive of the Centre for Sport and Human Rights. I've been in this position for about six years. The work of the center is focused on helping the sector of sport and its ecosystem. Every industry has an ecosystem that it operates within: suppliers, buyers, customers, all different types of actors. And sport is no different. We essentially help the sector of sport and the ecosystem of sport understand its responsibilities when it comes to respecting human rights, and also how to further human rights in sport. Oftentimes, because of the role of sport in society as a public good, this is also a recipe for the advancement of human rights more broadly, beyond the sector of sport.

We do that in a variety of ways. This includes work around safeguarding those participating in sport. If sport isn't safe, it's not going to deliver on its social promise. So sport fundamentally

has to be safe. And when bad things happen—inevitably, things do happen—what's done about it? That remedy is something that in human rights work is incredibly important and yet often very difficult to achieve. And we take on a variety of other areas beyond that. We do a lot of work on child safety, child voice.

Our work [also addresses] policy. Typically, sports bodies have policies or regulations that govern how they conduct their own governance of the sport, like athlete eligibility, human rights, gender, regulations around who can compete in different categories or weight classes, to mega sporting events and how those are prepared and executed in a way that takes predictable human rights risks into account and works to prevent them through stakeholder engagement.

So it covers quite a bit of work. I came to this job with a background as a former athlete. I was a member of the US Women's National Soccer Team for eight years, and also worked in sport administration in a couple of different roles, including at FIFA [Federation Internationale de Football Association]. And with mega sporting events, I was on the 2026 bid team to bring the 2026 World Cup to North America. My role there was specific to the human rights requirements that were asked of FIFA at the time.

Rollo Romig: Could you give an example of specific problems that you tackle in your work?

Mary Harvey: There are host cities that are looking to put together their response to different human rights risks if they're hosting something like a mega sporting event. And part of that, for example, is anti-discrimination. We know that discrimination can happen. At the 2024 Olympic Games, the IOC [International Olympic Committee] wanted, as part of its commitment to respect human rights and also the Paris Local Organizing Committee's commitment to respect human rights, to educate and train its entire volunteer workforce and its paid workforce on recognizing forms of discrimination that can occur during a mega sporting event. Defining what it is, what it can look like. And third, and most importantly, what is the expectation in terms of what you do about it? So we were asked to do that by the IOC, and we wrote and produced that video that was then seen in both French and in English by the entire workforce. Small thing, but big impact.

Rollo Romig: Would you say there are many other groups who work specifically at the intersection of sports and human rights?

Mary Harvey: There are quite a few active in various elements of it. Human Rights Watch does work related to sport. Amnesty International does work that's related to sport. If you just saw

recently, they had a big campaign around the hijab ban in France. So elements of their work as human rights organizations touch sport, but they also touch other things.

We occupy a related space, and they're an important critical part of the ecosystem because we need that awareness. And investigative journalism also plays a role. Where we come in is, given the awareness that's been generated, how do you then help make progress against it?

We aren't necessarily an advocacy group. We don't raise money based on campaigns. We raise money in order to help governments, sponsors, and the different actors in the ecosystem of sport, identify what role they can play in addressing these human rights risks or harms, and then collectively or individually, what they can do about it.

Rollo Romig: Aside from what you just said, what would you say makes your organization's work distinct from others who are working on the same issues?

Mary Harvey: I would say there are a variety of things that make us unique. First of all is that we're doing a deep dive in the sector of sport. When people look at that, they say, "Well, is that really human rights work?" It absolutely is human rights work. And I'll give an example. How many people today understand worker welfare challenges in the Gulf? Why? Because they hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup. It's a similar argument you can make for climate change and climate impacts. If sports starts to address it, it starts to permeate the mainstream, and it starts to affect people in a very significant way. The number of people that it touches in terms of information is enormous when you look at it through the lens of sport and its largest events.

Rollo Romig: So sport becomes a portal for people to learn more about human rights in general.

Mary Harvey: Exactly. Here's another example: the boxers in the Olympics. There was an issue around athlete eligibility. Well, first of all, there was a massive privacy-rights violation, because the names of those athletes shouldn't have ever been released. Because their names were leaked, they became targets of horrible cyberbullying and other abuse. And there was never evidence provided that they were not in fact eligible, and it was determined that they were, in fact, eligible. But look at what these two women endured as a result of that. Regardless of where you stand on athlete eligibility, they were deemed eligible. But there it was a privacy-rights violation that led to egregious human rights abuses that they experienced as a result. But because it happens at something like the Olympics, it then becomes something that millions of people know about. These are absolutely human rights issues.

Rollo Romig: The way that story ran wild globally was kind of terrifying.

Mary Harvey: And look who pays the price.

Rollo Romig: Could you point to an example of something that you tried that maybe didn't get the result you were hoping for, but where you learned something from that experience?

Mary Harvey: A lot of the work that we do is tackling big problems. We do a lot of thought leadership work. I'll give an example: How do you apply a human rights lens to athlete eligibility? You can apply sort of a sporting fairness lens to it, of what's fair, what's not fair, what are causes of advantage, what have you. But when it comes to looking at issues or problems through a human rights lens and through human rights standards, which is what we do, it may lead to a different outcome, because prevention of rights and harms to people are paramount versus concepts of what's fair or not fair.

What we've learned over time is in certain parts of the world, when you [talk about] applying a human rights lens, that needs unpacking. For example, in North America, the term "human rights" doesn't resonate. If it's "human rights," we're talking about other parts of the world, versus civil rights, versus anti-discrimination, versus DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion]. It goes by a variety of different names, but it's all human rights. So what we've had to do over time is adapt how we communicate to the language that is accessible by everyone. That's why we use the term "responsible sport." The UN [United Nations] Guiding Principles talk about a responsibility to respect human rights as organizations versus state actors, which have the responsibility to protect human rights. But what does that mean? And does it apply to me? And if you use the term "responsible sport," it just seems to land. We've learned a lot about how we communicate this to make it accessible to people.

Rollo Romig: How much would you say your work involves shifting cultural norms?

Mary Harvey: A lot of global sport is governed out of Western Europe. That's just a fact. Pick a sport, and probably the governing body for it is based in Western Europe. Professional sports vary depending on what country you're dealing with, but a lot of sport governance is based out of Europe.

And when it comes to culture, particularly in the sport that I come from, which is the sport of soccer, there are hundreds of years of culture. So when you introduce things like remedy, which is the pointy part of human rights, it gets challenging to truly address it. You can bring awareness of the human rights risks and potential harms that can happen. Specifically, here's

what you need to do to change. But the way for enduring change to happen is it gets put into culture. That's where it sticks, and that's the part that's proven to be the most challenging, that cultural shift. Because culture is famously difficult to change.

We've seen a lot of changes as it relates to human rights as the result of a crisis. There's a burning platform, there's a dumpster fire of some sort, and then there's change that happens. But does that change really get embedded culturally, or over time? Or, does it sort of unwind as it becomes less of a crisis, and you come out the other side of it? Is culture actually changing?

Rollo Romig: When it comes to trying to change cultural norms, what strategies do you think are effective?

Mary Harvey: I would say that when you relate it to things that are existential threats. Now, that's a tough thing to do. Who wants to talk in those terms, right? Nobody. So when you look at, for example, a mega sporting event, and you look at all of the things that it can and should be about—which are wonderful things—economic development, human development, the social good. I mean, the spirit at the Paris Olympic Games was amazing. It was just this incredibly wonderful, vibrant, welcoming event, which is wonderful, which is what they should be.

But if egregious harm has happened—and I'm not saying that happened with Paris at all—but at another sporting event, if harm has happened as part of that event, it impugns the integrity of the event in a fundamental way. It is fundamental to sport delivering on its social promise that there isn't harm happening. And if your core value proposition are these mega sporting events, which carry with them all sorts of economic income generation for the event owners or broadcasters or sponsors, if it's associated with harm, it fundamentally undercuts that.

There are human rights processes where you can never prevent harm from happening. You can conduct due diligence to understand the nature of it and at least lessen the likelihood of it happening. And you can put in place measures to the best of your ability to ensure those things don't happen. When they do happen, what's equally as important, if not more important, is what you then do about it to make it right, whatever that looks like. In some cases, you can never make it right. Death, for example. But what does that look like? And that's the part that you see more and more sports bodies coming to understand, that part of responsible event hosting now is understanding what the risks are and mitigating them to the best extent possible.

Rollo Romig: When you're working with governments who are hosting a lot of these mega sporting events, or other institutions that are responsible, how do you get them on board with your program?

Mary Harvey: In the European Championships, or Euros, that just happened in Germany, for example, the state actor has a responsibility to protect human rights, because we're all signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So they have that responsibility as part of hosting an event. The role that we've played is working with governments to understand and help them develop a commitment and pledge to host a responsible event from a human rights standpoint, an event that protects and furthers human rights, what does that commitment look like?

Typically, the part of government that we end up working with is foreign affairs departments, because that's where human rights tends to be in government. So we look at two things. One is, can sport play a role in their national action plans for human rights? Because every country has a National Action Plan (NAP) for Human Rights. Switzerland, for example, has sport written into their National Action Plan. The second one is understanding what state duties are to protect human rights when you're the host state for a mega sporting event. What can we learn from previous hosts?

To address that last point, we helped the Government of Switzerland host something called the Host Governments Forum, where they bring together governments that will be hosting and those who have previously hosted to talk about what they have learned., what they did you not expect they would have had to deal with, and what they would have done differently. Those are things that we help governments unpack and understand, as well as the nature of their role in protecting human rights. And part of that involves knowing what the risks are.

I'll give an example. Human trafficking is a big risk when it comes to hosting a mega sport event. That gets very quickly into law enforcement because it’s against the law. In the United States, for example, the Justice Department as well as the executive branch get involved in prevention. So just bringing those sorts of very real risks and issues to life as they pertain to governments is part of what we do.

There are other things that we can do, like advising governments on policy. For example, if they want to set up a safe sport entity, as was done in the United States. They've done that in other countries as well. There are pluses and minuses to how that’s done, [so we advise] on what the

role of the state can be or what other states have learned from that journey themselves. Providing that information is something else that we do to help governments.

Rollo Romig: What have you learned about how best to run the Host Government Forums in order to get the best results?

Mary Harvey: First of all, you have to make sure it's a safe space. So whether it's Chatham House Rule, whether it's confidential, people are going to be candid and forthright based on the environment that you create. And they'll be circumspect and guarded if they feel that it's not a safe space. So a big part of it is creating an environment where people feel like they can really share, and having to step in and enforce that if people don't abide by that part of it. That's probably the biggest thing.

I would say the second thing is teeing up issues that are scoped such that people can really dig into them. If they're incredibly broad, it's difficult to understand what part of the government can really tear into the issue. Governments are big places.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about the role collaboration plays in your work.

Mary Harvey: Quite a bit. We have organizations that are members of the Centre for Sport and Human Rights. Several of them are UN agencies, some of them are player unions, some of them are human rights advocacy and civil society organizations.

There's so many examples of partnerships, but I'll give some concrete ones. We helped FIFA do a program in Qatar in 2022 called Human Rights Volunteers, which was basically training a subset of volunteers for the event to observe human rights risks or possible issues that were happening during the actual games at the 2022 FIFA World Cup. And we partnered with OHCHR [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights] to come in and do the actual observer training. That's exactly what they do—they train people all over the world to do observer training for human rights harms.

Another example is special rapporteurs who write reports for the UN on a variety of issues, be it cultural rights, be it violence against women and girls. We get asked to partner with organizations, potentially with civil society organizations, to provide input. When it comes to violence against people who are transgender or differences in sexual development or what have you, we would partner, for example, with an organization like ILGA, International Gay and Lesbian Association. We partner with different organizations on subject matter expertise primarily, but

also to obtain diversity of input. And most importantly, to receive input from those affected by whatever human rights issue we're talking about.

I can give an example of that. If you're talking about protocols for safeguarding, it's important to understand the nature of the harm that can occur. And if you're designing ways to investigate—protocols for responsible investigations, and protocols to offer remedy—you need to talk to the people who've been affected by that in a responsible way, in a way that doesn't re-traumatize them. But it's critical that that process takes place. So partnerships with the organizations that represent those affected are also very, very important to have, because that gets into the authenticity and legitimacy of the work itself.

Rollo Romig: What have you learned about how best to initiate partnerships and collaborations, and how to cultivate them over time?

Mary Harvey: We have core values for the organization, and the first one is trust. We're a new organization, the Centre for Sport and Human Rights. Who are these guys, right? Every time you work with an organization, you have an opportunity to either deepen trust or potentially damage trust. And I see every single opportunity we have to work with—be it a new sports body, be it a new UN agency, be it a new sponsor—that we are who we say we are. When we say we're going to deliver something, we do it, and in a way that either meets or exceeds expectations. For us, it's very much based on performance and how you show up, and you build that reputation over time for being exactly who you say you are.

Rollo Romig: Who have you looked to in your work as inspiration?

Mary Harvey: I think it depends, because we cover a lot of different areas. For example, organizations that create safe spaces for courageous conversations. Chatham House does that. I would say organizations that deliver on measurement and evaluation, because a lot of times, measuring the impact of preventing something bad from happening is difficult to quantify. How do you quantify a near miss, or something that's not happening? That's a challenge. And a lot of what we do isn't always public, and that gets to be its own challenge—being able to communicate that you're actually having a lot of value and possibly playing a critical role in an outcome that affects a lot of people, but it's not something we're necessarily public about.

Rollo Romig: How do you approach measurement of results in your work?

Mary Harvey: It depends on what we're doing. First of all, our strategic plan has five priorities, and within the five strategic priorities, there's a matrix of sort of three by three outcomes in the

world we're trying to see, and lining up these strategic initiatives and how they move against the world we're trying to achieve, which is a world of responsible sport. Sometimes those metrics are difficult to define. In some cases, because of where culture and the industry is, you're stuck on banging away at awareness and culture change, which means that achievement of the other things is a lot more difficult. So you're trying to move, but it's not so easy because there are other issues in the way.

When it comes to specific programmatic things that we do, and we have various grants, those have very specific defined outcomes. Those are outcomes against our overall strategic plan, but they're also very specific to the programming that we're doing. So if it's prevention of child sexual abuse in the context of hosting a mega sporting event, there are specific things that we're doing programmatically and then specific ways that we're measuring ourselves against that. A lot of times we will employ a measurement evaluation and learning vendor that will come in and help us design how this is going to be measured.

Rollo Romig: Does anything occur to you that you haven't already touched on that you might want to share as a lesson from your work that might be helpful those tackling childhood sexual abuse?

Mary Harvey: I live in hope and not fear. We're dealing with a dark topic, but I look at someone like Mary Robinson, who is the founding patron of the Centre. The Elders is this group that Mary Robinson leads, and they're dealing with the existential threats of nuclear non-proliferation and climate change. Those are tough issues to be dealing with, and she self-describes being a "prisoner of hope." Childhood sexual abuse is a really hard thing. What does hope look like in dealing with things that are hard, and how do you keep oxygen and inspiration in making progress to eradicate it, because it can get dark and hard. This is egregious human rights abuse that we're talking about, and the key to being sustainable is finding a way to motivate and inspire people to do what's necessary to prevent this from happening. But people aren't going to do it solely because they've been threatened. I think a big part of it is *inspiring* people and living in hope for change.

Rollo Romig: Without shying away from everything that's difficult, how do you keep a focus on the positive destination that you're working towards?

Mary Harvey: Especially when, particularly recently, if you look at the news, a lot of it is based in fear. Fear is everywhere, and I don't think fear inspires people. Fear can be a motivator, but I fundamentally believe that people want to be inspired. So how do you bring that into something

that's dark and disturbing and awful? That's the challenge. But if we don't have it, then we're just in a dark place, and we're looking at fear as a motivator, and that's a tough place to be.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything that I haven't asked that you'd like to add?

Mary Harvey: When it comes to sport and prevention of child sexual abuse, if I look back at my career, my own trajectory as an athlete 40 years ago, there was a culture and a set of norms about what was acceptable back then. That is not the case today. But it is never appropriate for certain things to happen. Making those bright lines visible and capturing them in policy, in compliance, and in regulations is really critical when it comes to sport, and I think we can do more of that. It is never acceptable for a coach and a player to have [inappropriate] relations, for example, whether they're a child or not. It's just not acceptable. Those are big, bright lines. And this is the culture shift that we see happening over time, but in different parts of the world, that culture shift hasn't happened.

And it's also about what consent looks like in different power equations. I think about things that I've experienced in my career, both as an athlete and then as a sports administrator. There's a lot of cultural work to be done that will lead to prevention, and a lot of it has to do with what's acceptable behavior and what isn't. Being really simple and clear: "This is never acceptable. This is never okay. It is never okay for X, Y, and Z to happen."

I think sport has a big role to play because of its role as a social good. If it's going to be a social good, and it's going to have social license to deliver on all these benefits for human development, then it has to be safe. There are certain non-negotiables. You can't have it both ways. And I think sport, given its status, has an opportunity to make those bright lines clear, because you can't be a social good and have social license and yet have certain things that are normalized that are just not and never okay. There's no free lunch.

Rollo Romig: In your work, there are opportunities to draw attention to what needs to happen.

Mary Harvey: It's safe to talk about prevention. But people get really uncomfortable when we start talking about remedy. It's happening—what do you do about it? That's the part that gets hard, and that's the part that needs the fix. When something bad happens, and it will, how you handle it is everything. And if it's not safe to report, who's going to report? If there's impunity, why would you report? Impunity leads to silence by design, which isn't preventing anything.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much for your time, Mary.

Rollo Romig (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

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