

**“The de-mystification of mental health is a very important result”: Gabriela Peixinho of Luta Pela Paz on breaking stigma and building resilience in Brazil’s favelas.**

Jessica Kantor  
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**Jessica Kantor: Can you please introduce yourself and talk a bit about your work in the field of youth mental health?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** My name is Gabriela Peixinho. I'm from Brazil, and I work as director of Luta Pela Paz here in Brazil. We began about 25 years ago in Maré, a huge complex of favelas, or slums. Our work focuses on the many people living there who are directly affected by armed violence.

In Maré, we have three different armed groups, and a lot of exposure to this violence that impacts the daily life of people there. We work directly with children, adolescents, and young people. We were founded by Luke Dowdney, an Englishman who came to Brazil to conduct research on the motives that drive young people to engage in these groups. He wrote a book on his research in ten different countries.

What we learned with this research is that common risk factors can be addressed in a collective way, so young people can overcome and succeed in other areas in life. Our methodology was built based on these learnings, and also in the work that we do in the field. Together with community leaders and young people, we built a strong methodology that we call the Five Pillars.

We offer sports, specifically boxing and martial arts. We offer education support and employability. We have a multidisciplinary team of social workers who try to understand personal, family, and community contexts to address the risk factors they identify. We also have a strong base of youth leadership. Through the Five Pillars methodology, Luta Pela Paz grew. We've replicated our experience in London with an academy, although now it's led by an independent organization called Fight for Peace.

We decided to expand our work through training programs. We recognize the knowledge base in favelas and we disseminate this knowledge to community-based organizations around the world to expand our impact.

The first line of work we do is to direct support to young people. The second is to codify methodologies and train other actors around the world. The last one is about advocacy, and how to influence public policies to make systemic changes in the communities where we work. We have these three lines of work, recognizing the different impacts that armed violence has on young people. One of the biggest is on mental health.

**Jessica Kantor: How do you find organizations to collaborate with? Is it mostly other organizations in South America, or in Brazil specifically?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** That's changed a lot. We started an international training program in 2014. We trained organizations in the UK, South Africa, Jamaica, and different countries around the world. During the pandemic, our effort to train organizations outside Brazil declined, and we expanded our network here in Brazil. In Latin America, we have partners in Colombia, in Mexico, and Peru, and we also train organizations in El Salvador. Many organizations, after being trained in our methodologies, agreed to join the alliance network that we promote through exchanges between these organizations.

We codify our methodologies, through principles and practice, to adapt this knowledge to specific contexts. We have methodologies in different areas, not only sports, but also mental health and youth leadership education. Our academy, Maré in Favela, is a hub of innovation. It's where we test methodologies, see the results, and adapt and extract lessons learned so that we can codify and disseminate this work.

**Jessica Kantor: How do organizations partner with you, or how do you find them?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** Several ways. We might open a public call to engage in our training program. This is how it happens in Brazil, but other partners can also refer organizations to us. We receive inquiries from many organizations that seek us out and want to be part of our network. It's an organic movement as well.

**Jessica Kantor: For the three different sections, how do you track success?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** We have a theory of change to understand the transformation that we promote with young people. The first [aspect] is self-perception, the second is relationship to others, and the third is how they see themselves in the future. Annually, we offer support so they can respond to different indicators and metrics within these three dimensions.

We have monitoring and evaluation in Luta Pela Paz to track young people from their entry into our organization. We use the Upshot system to understand the timelines if they are engaged in sports or education, or another network that's not inside Luta Pela Paz. [This helps us] understand what kind of violations, traumas, and risk factors they

have so we can address them. We also have a system to monitor young people, not only the self-survey we use annually.

**Jessica Kantor:** In your other pillars, you collaborate with organizations, and also do education and advocacy. How do you track success?

**Gabriela Peixinho:** The training program is similar. We use their entry as a baseline. At the end, we give them another self [survey]. Advocacy is much harder because it's difficult to see evidence of success in a small period of time, but we use indicators such as mutual projects, collaboration, and number of actors engaged in our network.

For our collaborative approach, we use the collective impact methodology created at Stanford. We adapted it and brought it to South Africa, Jamaica, and also Brazil. We use this to engage different sectors and actors in a common agenda, to put together a monitoring evaluation system to provide evidence on our work, and to have a communication flow to support this active network. We work as network facilitators to understand specific area priorities, and to address these through public policy advocacy.

**Jessica Kantor:** Can you share an example to illustrate the impact of your work?

**Gabriela Peixinho:** We use a broader understanding of mental health, not only specific medical questions, but also about how people feel about themselves, and how they relate to others. For sports, all the methodology we use addresses these kinds of questions, but we also have specific interventions for mental health, such as the care diaries developed together with UNICEF. The community care network also developed together with UNICEF to address this challenge with intentional purpose.

**Jessica Kantor:** Is it like CBT [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy] or DBT [Dialectical Behavior Therapy]?

**Gabriela Peixinho:** Yes, kind of, but we understand we need to anchor this methodology to our [own] community contexts. We try to help young people, children and adolescents to have agency in their own care, understand the different [factors] that affect their mental health, and how to overcome this.

We do this methodology with the care diary. It's a tool we use to mediate the work that a professional does with young people to address these challenges. It's a very successful methodology. One of the most important results is that young people reported they understand that mental health matters. When we go to favelas, mental health care has a stigma that it's only for rich people, and they don't have time for it. They don't actually have the key services that offer this good support. The de-mystification of mental health is a very important result, because they understand how it matters and how to seek help from the protective network around them. I'm not talking only about specialized services, I'm talking about friends, family, and all aspects that influence our good mental health.

**Jessica Kantor:** How do you engage with the community, specifically in the favelas? Do you knock on doors, access them at community gatherings, or speak with them when they collect services or resources from the government?

**Gabriela Peixinho:** We have different strategies because in Maré, Rio de Janeiro, where we began, we are very well-known. A very big list of young people come to Luta Pela Paz seeking our services. We've worked over the years to build credibility in the field, and we did it in Maré. When we operate in other Brazilian states, if we're not known in the community, we must use another entrance strategy with many community events.

We also actively search with our social professionals who go door to door talking to families to understand the context, needs, and priorities of the communities. We also use a lot of youth engagement. They spread the Luta Pela Paz work throughout the community. The most effective strategy is to use the youth leadership movement to expand and reach more families.

The first methodology is the care diaries. The second one, not only here in Brazil, is to strengthen the protection network so young people can work in a collaborative way, especially in favelas. With the communal care methodology, we train the professionals to identify warning signals in young people, so they can make a first contact.

This referral must be coordinated. It's not only about getting that service, but also working together to achieve the result. After we did this work with UNICEF, we decided to move to a third line with advocacy. Here in Rio de Janeiro, we had a discussion with the state Assembleia Legislativa, and we were able to approve a new public policy for mental health services in the favelas. This was a huge result for us, but this law was not implemented because it still needs budget investment. It's step by step with advocacy.

**Jessica Kantor:** How did you work on getting that legislation passed? Did you write it, or did you lobby lawmakers to write it? How long did you work on that?

**Gabriela Peixinho:** About one or two years. We presented our research from Maré and the results from our methodology. We're members of a community network of public services and other organizations for mental health, so we had their support as well. We also did a lot of lobbying and direct contact with legislators, and wrote the proposal too.

**Jessica Kantor:** What are some challenges that you weren't able to overcome, or things you tried that didn't work?

**Gabriela Peixinho:** The first is that this law was approved, but not implemented. Now we must work on the annual state budget to ensure we have a budget to implement this.

**Jessica Kantor:** Is it your responsibility to build that budget with them?

**Gabriela Peixinho:** No, it's not our responsibility, but we participate in public policy with dialogue and public hearings to influence the budget. This was a huge lesson learned. The other one is that we are an international organization, but in reality, we are a community-based organization. Our role is to test models, codify them, and deliver the results to public policy decision makers who can decide if it will solve a public problem, and become a public policy. We engage a lot in the monitoring and evaluation process, to provide evidence for these results, and consistently engage in this dialogue.

Nevertheless, it's very important to do this together with different activists who have more weight in the public dialogue, for example, UNICEF. It was very important to us that we worked side by side with UNICEF in this discussion, because they could open channels for us to lobby and establish the conversation.

A little bit about our direct support is that as a community-based organization, we have limits. We receive very complex cases of young people who have been exposed to different kinds of domestic violence. We also have to deal with certain rules made by the armed groups in the favelas.

It's not easy to denounce violence, because the armed groups don't want police to enter the favelas. It's very complex, and we are not a specialized mental health provider, so we need to hear these issues from young people, and prepare the team not to think they can solve it by themselves. They need to be connected with specialized services.

We do refer to specialized services, but here in Brazil, it's a fragile system. They cannot absorb the demand, so they refer back to us. It's like a ping pong game. In the middle of the ping pong are children whose lives are deeply affected. That's challenging for our work because there are a lot of very complex demands.

**Jessica Kantor: How does your organization keep its employees safe? Do the armed groups just ignore the work you're doing because they don't think it's truly harming their efforts, or do you work with them in some capacity to make sure you're still able to enter communities and stay safe?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** The armed groups ignore our work because it's not harming their efforts. It's not a problem at all for them. They see we deliver benefits for the community, so it's a tacit agreement; we don't negotiate. They understand we are good for the community. We deliver our work without problems with them.

When we have security problems is when we have operations. When the police enter a favela, there's a lot of confrontation. Everyone is at risk of getting a gun pointed at them or even hurt. We have security protocols for everyone on our team. We can close our academy when schools and health clinics close in Maré. It's something that happens a lot. It's sad, it impacts their lives, but it's common.

**Jessica Kantor: There are so many other states and countries where this occurs, and organizations that need to work in those communities. They would not be able to find success as just a group of people from outside the community, coming in to establish something. Working with people who grew up in the community, who are aware and can sense those things, that's absolutely needed.**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** We have different layers of communication in the community. It's a security protocol as well for us to survive, so our work is sustainable for a long time. When armed groups have guns in their hands, it's a symbol of power, masculinity, and an expression of force. It's reproduced in different aspects of their lives.

It's very common that when young people want to engage with their fathers, they want to learn boxing to learn how to defend themselves or fight. After our intentional pedagogical work, they understand what combat sports can bring to their lives, such as life skills, discipline, respect, self-control, and emotional regulation. It's very important.

We also reference this in community events. When I organize a boxing ring so they can fight in the middle of the favela, young people see a member of our academy fighting with another symbol of force. It's good. They have the status that armed groups have, but they do not want to join the armored group. They want to be the one in the ring fighting and showing so much strength. This symbolism is very important for us as well.

**Jessica Kantor: What are the attitudes towards youth mental health in the community, and among policymakers and the organizations you collaborate with? Do they still ignore it?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** We had a huge change with the pandemic. Mental health became a big agenda item for Brazilian policymakers. How children interact with the digital environment and social networks is an active discussion in Brazil. In favelas, most of the residents are black people, so it's not the same. They [might feel] their lives matter less. It's the same for mental health support. In favelas, they think that if they can survive, they're okay. They think they [just] need to survive day to day because maybe tomorrow they will get shot [in a confrontation in the favela].

We work a lot on their future perspective to engage them in other opportunities. If they believe they [might only live until] tomorrow, they will not engage in education, or probably anything else. We saw when we started to offer specific mental health services in Luta Pela Paz that we didn't have a demand. We had a lot of demand for sports and education, but for mental health, no one would come in the beginning.

We wanted to understand this. We had a lot of discussions with young people and families, and we heard a lot about this. They would say, "This service is not for us. We need to survive. We don't need to have good mental health because it's not possible. Can't you see the conditions we live in?" They didn't want to be seen as fragile.

**Jessica Kantor: Have you been able to address that, or is it still a challenge?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** Yes. When we offer sports sessions, we also have a specific session on personal development that they are obliged to join. In these sessions, we discuss different agendas on gender, race, and mental health. We want to promote critical thinking in young people, and destigmatize mental health. We have an intentional pedagogical approach, so they understand this service is also for them. They can access it and have good results as well.

**Jessica Kantor: After someone participates in the sports program, are they more inclined to participate in the mental health program, or do they just appreciate it for what it is?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** No, they're more inclined. Group movement is very important. If they see their peers engaging in different activities, they are more willing to engage as well, so we work on the group experience a lot.

**Jessica Kantor:** **Where is this work going in the next five years? Will you still be battling the same issues? Or will you be able to break through a lot of the barriers and make impactful change in the favelas?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** A part of me knows that we will battle the same issues. We have a strategy to move forward in some areas. We want to have mental health methodologies in schools. Our work is to test innovative approaches and provide results for discussion with policymakers. We tested our mental health methodologies, and the results were good. Now, we want to spread it within the education system. It's the best way to make sure that children have this support. We are talking about primary interventions, not the specialized services.

We also want to take these two methodologies to our international network, because we are still using only the mental health methodology specifically for Brazil. We want to use it in other countries as well, together with other community-based organizations.

**Jessica Kantor:** **For schools, are you already speaking with legislators on that collaboration? Or is it a project that you hope to embark on in the next few years?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** Next year, yes.

**Jessica Kantor:** **Any other thoughts, lessons or insights for other social entrepreneurs and organizations who do similar work?**

**Gabriela Peixinho:** We have a youth council, Luta Pela Paz, that's very important for us because they provide governance. They work with us to understand the priorities and solutions we can offer to young people. This experience with young leaders in Luta Pela Paz is something we always share with other organizations. We also have a specific strategy, not just inside Luta Pela Paz, so they can spread it to mobilize and lead the advocacy work. It's our strategy.

**Jessica Kantor:** **Thank you so much for your time.**

*Jessica Kantor is an independent journalist specializing in health, human rights, and social impact. Her work can be found in Fast Company, Healthcare Quarterly, Innately Science, and others, and she has been a Solutions Insights Lab interviewer since 2023. Additionally, she provides communications strategy to nonprofits and INGOs who are working on the Sustainable Development Goals. She is a living kidney donor based in Los Angeles.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*