

# JOANNA MARANHÃO'S ROOM

## Here She was victim of statutory rape in the sports field

I have been swimming since I was 3 years old. I fell in love with the sport and from an early age my dream was clear: I wanted to become a professional swimmer and Olympic athlete.

Since I was 8 years old, my coach became an important part of my life. My family and I trusted him, we never imagined that something like this would happen.

### FROM TRUST TO ABUSE

He became very close to my family, so much so that my mother would let him drive me back from practice.

I was very focused and since I was very talented, he used to give me extra practice, I felt that this was ideal and necessary to get where I wanted.

This was already a normal routine, but later, he started getting into the water with me to teach me some exercises, that's where the abuse started.

I don't feel comfortable sharing the details, but at nine years old I knew that it was wrong, that it hurt me, and that it made me feel ashamed.

The abuse began in the pool and escalated to rape over more than 4 months. My family trusted him, and he took advantage of the periods he could be alone with me.

I didn't know how to verbalize or who to talk to, so I kept it to myself, until the abuse turned into rape. After experiencing it, I realized that it was time to run away from it, I found an excuse to convince my family that I wanted to change clubs and schools.

I didn't want to talk to him or experience those episodes ever again.

## MY ADOLESCENCE

I was not a normal teenager, given the place swimming had in my life.

I had to get up at 4:30 a.m. and jump in the water at 5 so I could go to school later in the morning and practice again in the afternoon.

Swimming was a big part of my life, so the change in behavior, fainting, panic attacks, and fear of men were perceived as normal or a response from such a young professional athlete.

Now, I understand much better that these were all responses to trauma.

Vivid memories of what I went through only came back to me when I was 17 and returned from my first Olympic Games in Athens. Those were the most brutal years of my life. I couldn't understand how my brain kept these memories blocked for so long.

## MY JOURNEY TO HEALING

After reliving and remembering the incidents, I began my healing journey.

A rollercoaster of emotions and suicide attempts aside, this process made me stronger.

It made me realize that just by accepting my vulnerability, it would make me stronger.

I didn't stop swimming, but I wasn't as competitive as before, remembering that I had lived the best and worst experiences of my life in the same environment. So my ultimate goal became making peace with the sport and what I could do as an abuse survivor in that space.

## FACING TRAUMA

Dealing with trauma was a process of verbalizing and letting people around me know what I went through and the process of navigating all of this.

In 2008 I disclosed my case publicly, but due to the statute of limitations, I was unable to press charges against him.

Other victims came forward and together we had to face a defamation process from him. That broke me and disappointed me, but I had taken the first step and I didn't want to stop. So, I began my advocacy journey, trying to extend the statute of limitations in my country.

## WHAT I AM NOW

My mother has been a great source of inspiration for me, she was by my side when I thought I was worthless, that it was a burden to be so broken.

Sometimes, I still feel like I'm a burden to people, especially when I feel affected. But the truth is that abusers are broken people.

We are the solution, I am part of the solution and I refuse to stop fighting.

This process of better understanding my role has given me strength to fight for the cause and for the little nine-year-old girl who was so scared and hurt.

After disclosing my case publicly, I began to advocate for raising the statute of limitations in my country. Today, victims have twice as much time to report the abuse they suffered as children and the legislation bears my name.

I understand that we still have a long way to go and that we need to get to a point where we eliminate statutes of limitations. However, embracing grace is also an important step in this process.

I also became a researcher and conducted the first study in Latin America that measured the degree to which athletes in Brazil have been exposed to psychological, physical and sexual violence.

Currently, I coordinate the Athletes Network for Safer Sport, a program of the Sports and Rights Alliance with members in 18 countries with the mission of creating and strengthening safe spaces for people affected by abuse in sport, promoting healing, amplifying the voices of others and advocating for systemic change.

Among the many activities we promote on the Network is the Emergency Fund, a unique allocation that helps victims and survivors with financial compensation for psychological, legal or any other help they may need on their healing path.

## **WHY SHOULD THEY LISTEN TO THE DEMANDS OF SURVIVORS**

Member States have an obligation to listen to survivors and act to address the problem. The fact that we are still standing and asking for your commitment is because thousands of children are going through the same horrible experiences that we did, and not all of them want or can become advocates. Some will be forced to remain silent for the rest of their lives, unable to access justice or reparation, because people with the power to make decisions continue to resist acting correctly.

This is an invitation to decision-makers to choose a path that includes those who have lived the experience, to build a safe space to co-create solutions, whether through policy or casework.

Working collaboratively with survivors is another way to recognize the dynamics of power imbalances and demonstrate a real commitment to concrete solutions.



**movimiento de  
valientes**  
Latinoamérica y el Caribe