

Good morning everyone and thank you for coming here today.

My name is Mhairi Maclennan, I'm from Scotland, and amongst many things, I'm an athlete.

I'm incredibly grateful to be here today, and truly believe that it's of utmost importance that we are having these discussions in today's political and sporting climate. It is somewhat curious to me that we are here to discuss athletes' freedom of expression. If this panel was about freedom of expression of teachers, or doctors, or researchers, I imagine we might question why the panel existed in the first place. Because in other professions, you are seen as a person, an individual who partakes in society and is of course entitled to their human right of freedom of expression.

But with sport, it's different. Why is it different?

Sport is, in fact, not as meritocratic as we like to think. From a young age, through talent pathways, you're taught to be grateful for the endorsements you receive, for funding and for assistance. I distinctly remember being told, at an international event, to make sure I was seen by the sponsors to be friendly and positive. I've also been told that I needed a 'story' to make me appealing to sponsors. As for national governing bodies, we jump through hoops, hoping to secure their favour and subsequently their funding. We fear rocking the boat in case of losing sponsorship or performance opportunities. We become characters, we play a role, the role of performer and we silence our opinions.

It's not that there's some conspiracy in sports to silence athletes, but rather the emphasis on medals and success at all and any cost that silently revokes our right to freedom of expression.

There are so many invested parties in any given athlete, or team's performance. Society projects onto us what they want to see – medals, success, positivity, and importantly, gratitude. Athletes so often become these mythical figures who are idealised to the extreme. This pressure to uphold certain ideals is not sustainable and when athletes or sports people do use their right to freedom of expression, it is so often met with incredulous outcries because the illusion is shattered.

So why am I here?

Well, firstly, I'm an athlete, and some might say that to have a panel session on the right to freedom of expression for athletes, without an athlete, would be somewhat incomplete, so I thank the organisers again for having me here today.

Secondly, I'm an athlete who has used my freedom of expression and taken a stance. A stance against sexual violence in sport. I found 'my story' those sponsors so eagerly hoped for. But sadly, it's not quite what they'd hoped for.

A year and a half ago, my previous coach was banned for 5 years for sexual abuse and harassment of his athletes. Myself, included. 5 years... after which he could have returned and continued as he had been doing for the previous 30 years of his coaching career, dating back to before I was born.

So, I spoke up. Not necessarily for me, but for all those future athletes that would have suffered the same fate. I told my story, I used my human right to freedom of expression, and I waived my anonymity.

There were definitely people who rightly warned me of the potential repercussions of putting my name to my story, warnings of harassment, personal, online attacks, and even death threats. But I equally felt the pressure from the media to speak publicly about my story, to waive my anonymity and speak freely.

Since I told my story, my friend and colleague, Kate Seary, and I, launched and now run an organisation called Kyniska Advocacy. We are the athletes, representing the athlete's voice. We operate in the UK only at the moment, and we campaign for progressive policies in sport to better protect, respect and celebrate women and girls in sport. We work with a cohort of 10 elite female athlete ambassadors from different sports who have all faced barriers from sexual violence, to racism, to body shaming and mental health struggles, and it's our job to consult and negotiate with the UK and devolved governments, and NGBs to instil structural and cultural change to create a safer, fairer sporting environment.

We are athletes, speaking out against injustices, for athletes. But we're not the only ones. Athletes, globally, are using their right to freedom of expression and demanding change in a sector traditionally resistant to change. From the French athlete, Emma Oudiou and her documentary, SUITE which uncovers systemic sexual abuse in French athletics with testimonies from several athletes who all chose to waive their anonymity, to Gymnasts for Change in Canada led by 2 former gymnasts who suffered abuse from their former coaches and are demanding a national inquiry into sports.

Athletes' voices are powerful. At the end of the day, sport is nothing but the people who partake in them, and without us there is no sport. If an athlete has something to say, they should not be deterred. Athletes can be instrumental in setting up/joining youth advisory boards, holding national governing bodies to account, using social media, speaking with journalists, writing to politicians, and even speaking to friends and family.

Today, I'm sure you'll hear many comments on the pros and cons of athletes speaking out and using their platforms to engage in politics. Of course, sometimes it's sponsors and governing bodies pulling athletes from one side to another in a polarised world, asking us to take a stance on the flavour of the month, but I'd like to posit that that is further commoditisation of athletes and not organic, authentic freedom of expression.

So, to round off, we should not exclude athletes from conversations on safety, freedom of expression, performance sponsorship, racism, sexual violence, or any other topic related to sport.

We are experts through lived experience. Listen to us, involve us, learn from us.