**Women in sports and cultural traditions**

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The recent FIFA World Cup in Football for Women has, after the highly successful events in Australia and New Zealand, become overshadowed by the way the star of the Spanish football team, Jenni Hermoso, was greeted by the Spanish Football Federation President Luis Rubiales when he congratulated her and her team on being world champions and gold medallists. He not only hugged her, he also kissed her, right on the mouth, according to photographs and media reports. First, it was said it was with the woman’s consent, then it was said there was no consent; well, in the situation of excitement, there would hardly have been much time for verbal communication, body language or eye contact. And the Football President may just have behaved in a way that he thought was expected of him, perhaps more for the media and the public than himself. Alas, the unfortunate incident now overshadows the great Spanish team’s world victory, and the media thrives on it. FIFA has suspended Rubiales, and a few days ago Spain’s Football Federation demanded his resignation. Investigations into his general behaviour separate from the specific incident have begun. Formal pre-investigations have begun to explore if criminal conduct has taken place. Thus far, Rubiales has refused to resign.
Most of us find what happened to be wrong, that Rubiales was indeed overstepping a red line. In the past, he may have gotten away with it in the Spanish and Latin culture more broadly. But now the ‘MeToo Campaign’ has paved the way for women to speak up and object to men’s outdated behaviour, with sexual harassment and even abuse–sometimes ‘just’ seen as acceptable male chauvinist behaviour.
We can easily agree that there is a need for discussing and correcting such behaviour, indeed giving women the right to set new rules which protect them better and make gender relations more equal. I believe Spain is a country where the ‘Don Juan’ behaviour has been quite deeply a part of the culture, without always being seen as wrong as it looks, well, as seen from a male perspective–until our time and days when women dare say, “we have had enough”, and it is becoming politically incorrect and unacceptable.
More broadly, we realise that there is a need for discussing and improving gender relations in many fields, indeed eradicating harassment and gender discrimination, in Spain and in most if not all other countries. This certainly applies to sports for women, the main topic of my article today. But the article was also meant to be a tribute to women footballers and other sportswomen. Thus, in many ways, it is unfortunate that the serious gender issues debate, triggered by an unfortunate incident, drew away attention from the women footballers’ achievements, meant to be a very happy time for the Spanish women gold medallists in football and for all sports interesting people at home and abroad.
The current case not only takes away attention from the success of the sportswomen, but also discussing how to improve the conditions for women in football and other sports in general, not only in the fields now highlighted. The positive aspects related to women in football and other sports should have been celebrated, and we should also discuss other issues regarding the uphill road that women often have to climb in many fields in sports. Alas, the positive issues are now overshadowed by the current issues.
However, I must hasten to stress that the ‘MeToo’ issues are important, but I wish they could have been discussed at another time. On the other hand, one can also argue that they should certainly be discussed now, and harassment and abuse issues should have been higher on the agenda earlier. The proposed broader investigations about the lack of gender equality, with harassment and abuse, even crime, and an outdated culture, are indeed important, and correctional measures must be implemented. Much of that would be debates and work within women’ sports organisations, but it will also include men’s sports organisations, and society at large, in Spain and other countries.
Just now, in the current case in Spain, there are opinion polls indicating that most people are on the side of the women, wanting more protection of women and better gender relations. The majority of people seems to be against Rubiales, and if they have realised that is not politically and culturally correct any longer to go along with the outdated cultural behaviour. Top politicians have engaged themselves in the controversy, certainly in support of the women. FIFA, the international football association is engaged, again on the side of the women. But I have not yet seen that the country’s powerful Roman Catholic Church has spoken about the issues, although I am sure that many individual priests and sisters have spoken, in support of the women. The church and other religious leaders are always important, even in the more secular countries in Europe, and in Spain, religion still plays a quite important role, yet, declining or becoming less visible in public life.
The controversy that now unfolds in Spain and beyond has led to a deep crisis in sports and also in other fields of society. It will take a long time to clear the air and develop a new culture as regards gender equality, in football and in other fields, in Spain and elsewhere. I am saddened, too, about the debate because the great success of the women footballers should have been a time to celebrate and be happy, promoting women in football and other sports. Many things need to be discussed and improved, also in sports for men, indeed as regards eradication of racial and other discrimination.
This time, though, the situation in Spain means that we must focus on eradication of gender discrimination, with timetables and action plans, so that sexual harassment can indeed become unacceptable and so, that parents can risk that their daughters play football and engage in other sports, and so that the young women themselves can feel safe and comfortable in the great games. As with all change, indeed as regards cultural change, a lot of work has to be done, and it will take some time. During the work, yet, having our objectives right, we should not be too keen on victimising the men who have belonged to an outdated culture, in sports and other fields of society, in Spain and elsewhere. To change cultural traditions are always difficult. Both women and men should have sounded the alarm earlier. Now it is time to look ahead, and to work together, so that the wrongs of the past and present can indeed be changed. The Spanish women footballers, world champions in 2023, will not only be remembered for their achievements on the football pitch, but in much broader ways in football, other sports and in society at large.