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#SeAcabó: how a mass-mediated “social drama” made visible and confronted (subjective and objective) violence in women’s football in Spain

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ABSTRACT

The victory of the Spanish national women’s football team at the 2023 FIFA World Cup was marred by the mass-mediated non-consensual kiss on midfielder, Jennifer Hermoso, by Luis Rubiales, then President of the Royal Spanish Football National Federation. The kiss sparked general outrage worldwide and led to the prosecution of Rubiales for sexual assault and coercion. Drawing on the concepts of “moral shock” and “social drama,” this article explores how this widely disseminated episode of “subjective violence” resulted in a shock capable of mobilising and politicising different agents. It does so through qualitative analysis of official statements and vernacular online discussions. The article makes the case that the unfolding of this social drama enabled more subtle (objective) violence, long endured by female athletes, to be brought into public discourse debate. In so doing, it boosted demands for social change. But such demands were also contested, in that the structured social drama resulted in an online “reactionary moral shock” characterised by anti-feminist and misogynistic discourses. Significantly, our analysis of these discourses reveals a shift in male victimisation narratives and strategies to disempower women and maintain sexual inequality. These include the denial of gender-based violence and the banalisation of sexual abuse.

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Introduction

The non-consensual kiss by Luis Rubiales, then President of the Royal Spanish Football National Federation (RFEF), to national team footballer Jennifer Hermoso, during the medal ceremony of the 2023 FIFA World Cup, captured widespread public attention in Spain and internationally. Having attained the status of world champions, Hermoso and

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the Spanish women's team were catapulted into the centre of an even more adversarial battle for gender equality. This battle was fought against a backdrop of increasing visibility over women's football; a renewed wave of feminist protests in Spain (Elisa García Mingo and Patricia Prieto Blanco 2021, Nahia Idoiaga Mondragon, Lorena Gil de Montes Echaide, Nagore Asla Alcibar and Maider Larrañaga Eguileor 2020); a context of growing reactionary anti-feminist movement both in Spain and internationally (Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk 2022); and a "rise in misogynistic discourses in digital environments" (Elisa García Mingo and Silvia Diaz Fernandez, 2023a p.897, 2023b; see also Xiaoting Han and Chenjun Yin 2022).

Our analysis of official and public reactions to the mass-mediated sexual assault of Hermoso reveals more layers of sexism and gender-based violence in sport and examines contemporary discourses of (anti)feminism, as well as the complex mechanisms that drive social change. We draw on Slavoj Žižek's (2008) typology of violence, the concept of "moral shock" (James M Jasper 2014), and cultural anthropologist Victor W Turner's (1990) schema of "social dramas" to examine how inequality and violence endured by female football players in Spain became visible and mobilised different groups after the FIFA World Cup 2023. This conceptual framework allows us to analyse the mass mediatisation of a non-consensual kiss which caused mass-outrage (reflected in online and offline protests in Spain and internationally), and initiated a "social drama" (Turner 1990) as well as widespread demands for social change. Sparked by an instance of "subjective violence" (Žižek 2008), we argue that this process shines light on less visible forms of violence (objective violence) endured by female footballers in public and private spaces, and, more recently, in digital spaces.

Drawing on a qualitative thematic analysis of official statements from the main actors involved in the social drama, and vernacular (i.e., informal, lay) online conversations in X (formerly Twitter) and Marca online (i.e., Marca is the most widely read newspaper in Spain) ($n = 900$), the article also examines counter-responses to the calls for social change, in the form of reactionary anti-feminist (digital) discourses. We illustrate how these anti-feminist and/or misogynistic mobilisations (which we identify as a "reactionary moral shock") were marked by changing discourses of male victimhood and other strategies, such as denial of gender-based violence, the banalisation of sexual abuse, the infantilisation of women, and tropes of unprofessionalism and a "diva complex." In this way, the article contributes to understanding the complex and continued disempowerment of women and attempts by some to maintain sexual inequality in sport and society more broadly.

Researching women's football in Spain and internationally

Although women's football has grown in popularity around the world (Alex Culvin and Ali Bowes 2023), alongside the commercialisation and mediatisation of the game (cf. Katie Liston 2023), feminist media research is still "under-represented" in communication and media studies when applied to sport (David Rowe and Kelen Katia Prates Silva 2023, 729). Academic research on women's football in Spain is also limited. This is noteworthy given that Spain "has been classified as one of the countries with the highest growth rate" in football (Pedro Gil-Madrona, Luz Marina Mendez-Hinojosa, Magaly Cárdenas-Rodríguez

and María Delgado 2022, 196), with the game played at school, recreational, and competitive levels.

Women were systematically excluded from football in Spain up to the late 1930s (Xavier Torredadella-Flix 2016), and in the last quarter of the twentieth century, during the so-called democratic transition (1970–1982), lesbian footballers experienced double discrimination and were often rendered invisible (María Dolors Ribalta Alcalde and Xavier Pujadas Martí 2020). Contemporary accounts reveal a persistent gender-based inequality in Spanish football. For instance, Mary Mahmoud (2016) notes the under-representation of women in football clubs as coaches and board members. Research has also explored school students' attitudes towards gender equality in football in Spain (Gil-Madrona et al. 2022) and the barriers that girls experience (Pedro Gil-Madrona, Javier Cachón-Zagalaz, Arturo Díaz-Suarez, Pedro Valdivia-Moral and María Luisa Zagalaz-Sánchez 2014). Together, this research demonstrates that football is still largely “linked to traditional ideas of masculinity” in Spain (Gil-Madrona et al. 2022, 197).

Research on women's football elsewhere has explored a number of topics, such as the language of newspaper coverage of female American football coaches from 1908 to 1960 (Katie Taylor 2022), female referees (Yavuz Demir and Bünyamin Ayhan 2023), women's increasing sport fandom (Kim Toffoletti 2017), and legacy media representation of female footballers and tournaments (Black 2018, 229; Shannon Scovel 2023). With the exception of a small number of studies (see, for example, Ann Marie Carragher and Luciana Lolich 2021; Caroline Azad 2023), women's football in the digital sphere remains under-researched compared to the men's. In the Spanish context, Javier Abuín-Penas and Julia Fontenla-Pedreira (2020) compared official Twitter representations of the men's and women's Spanish national teams during the 2018 FIFA World Cup and the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cups and concluded they reflected a pre-existing gender-based inequality in the game.

Accordingly, this article addresses several empirical gaps and breaks new conceptual ground. Empirically, we focus on professional female footballers' mediated voices and experiences as well as vernacular online discussions on inequality and gender-based violence in women's football in Spain. We utilise the concepts of “moral shock” (Jasper 2014) and “reactionary moral shock” together with Turner's (1990) model of “social drama” to examine the convoluted process that followed the non-consensual kiss to Hermoso by Rubiales at the 2023 FIFA World Cup. This framework allows us to explore the complexities of social change and permanence from a feminist perspective: specifically, the emancipation of women in football and ongoing resistance to it, both in digital and non-digital public spaces.

A theoretical approach to comprehend social change: violence, moral shocks, and social dramas

Stories with dramatic passages of violence often capture mass media and widespread public attention, leaving lasting impressions on personal and collective memories. Unusual violent cases especially capture the spotlight and generate public interest and growing audiences. However, a more meticulous understanding of “violence” challenges the simple idea that “violence sells.” In his critical exploration of violence, Žižek (2008) distinguishes between “subjective” and “objective” forms of violence. The

former is enacted by clearly identifiable groups or individuals, whereas the latter refers to more subtle forms of coercion and/or domination and includes systemic and symbolic dimensions. For instance, a “terrorist attack” or an army dropping a bomb in a civilian zone constitute clear acts of subjective violence. Both violent acts are “dramatic” in their perpetration and “easily attributable to a particular individual or group” (Black 2018, 229). In contrast, objective violence, might include the onset of a critical health condition due to living in an impoverished area. Despite the catastrophic consequences that can arise, objective violence is often widely normalised and remains invisible in contrast to an “all-too-visible subjective violence” (Žižek 2008, 2).

In spectacle-driven societies, “the invisibility of objective violence makes it media-unfriendly” (Paul A Taylor 2010, 122). Spectacular and explicit passages of subjective violence often and easily capture media attention, while mundane and complex stories of systemic/objective violence are more likely to remain untold and/or ignored. Mediatized episodes of subjective violence also have the power to scandalise, provoke strong emotions and mobilise individuals and social groups. In this way, moral shocks elicit action: these “suddenly imposed grievances have an impact, not because they are grievances, but because they are sudden” (Jasper 2014, 38). These defining features of subjective violence—suddenness and hyper-visibility—generate an emotional impact and/or “shock” among those who view them, more than that generated by the permanent and/or static nature of “objective” forms of violence. Objective violence rarely shocks individuals in the same way, because it is normalised and internalised and it is therefore more likely to be ignored and/or remain hidden.

James M Jasper and Jane D Poulsen (1995) argue that moral shocks are useful tools to recruit strangers to a cause, e.g., they show how animal rights protestors are more likely to be recruited by moral shocks (either visual or rhetoric) than by family, friends, and prior activism for other causes. Whilst normalised and mundane oppression and dominance (i. e., objective violence) rarely generate moral shocks, passages of subjective violence create an intense emotional impact on the viewers. In other words, episodes of subjective violence produce moral shocks which are “startling enough to arouse attention and—in some cases—elicit action” (Jasper 2014, 38). Under certain social conditions, particularly those that garner widespread public attention, powerful moral shocks can push individuals and groups to act through “the sequence of startle-anger-indignation” (Jasper 2014, 38). In this way, moral shocks are one of the main mechanisms of recruitment to protest (Jasper and Poulsen 1995).

The non-consensual kiss involving Hermoso produced a “moral shock” sufficiently strong to trigger a “social drama” (Victor W Turner 1988) within which important debates occurred concerning women, sport, (in)equality, and (anti)feminism. Drawing on Turner’s (1988, 33) schema of “social drama” defined as a “sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type,” we contend that high-intensity moral shocks can function as a means of: (1) unravelling the “breach” of a social drama, (2) staging a crisis, (3) generating redressive action, (4) restoring “normality” or socially recognising “the irremediable or irreversible breach of schism” (Turner 1990, 9–10), and, following Simon Cottle’s (2008) (re)formulation of Turner’s theory, (5) an ebbing/revivification phase, involving sustained cultural or historical resonance. The non-consensual kiss and

its subsequent mediatisation produced a moral shock which triggered a social drama and, we argue, an online “reactionary moral shock.” In so doing, complex and transformative dynamics were revealed.

Analysing official statements and online discussions on women’s football

The research design combines analysis of official statements issued by the main people involved in the social drama with qualitative and thematic analysis of vernacular online discussions before, during, and after the “moral shock.” The qualitative analysis includes the content of online discourses of key protagonists, public reactions to the sexual assault, and other online responses to the public statement shared by Aitana Bonmatí, Ballon D’Or winner in 2023 and 2024, and in September 2022, made by 15 Spanish female footballers prior to the World Cup (A Bonmatí 2022). Our analysis of official statements also includes those made by the RFEF in September 2022 and 2023 (RFEF 2022, 2023), two statements (one oral and one written) from Rubiales in August 2023 (Rubiales, 2023; Jorge Pacheco 2023), two further statements from the Spanish women’s national football team in August and September 2023 (FUTPRO 2023; Alexia Putellas 2023), and a personal statement on X from Hermoso in August 2023 (Jennifer Hermoso 2023).

The period of analysis extends from September 2022 to March 2024, when the Spanish prosecution service requested a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for the sexual assault and the alleged coercion of Hermoso (Marca 2024). It incorporates all stages of the social drama as it unfolded. Using this time period, we are especially sensitive to the interdependence between social permanence and social change and the complex dynamics that ensued which reveal much about (anti)feminist attitudes. In total, 600 tweets (150 tweets per statement), most of which were in Spanish, were collected and coded manually. The first 150 tweet responses (excluding advertisements and other tweets that did not engage with the topic) to each statement published on X were collected, anonymised, and transferred to Excel files. X was a source of data as it was a prominent platform used by the main figures in the social drama and where most of the subsequent (online) public discourses (e.g., through the hashtag #SeAcabo) took place.

We also collected additional information in the form of online comments made about two important news stories published by the popular Spanish sport newspaper Marca ($n = 300$). The first news story, published on September 22 2022, recounted players’ complaints to the RFEF and their demands for change (Rubén Jiménez 2022). The second, published on March 27 2024, announced the state prosecution’s request for a prison sentence for Rubiales (Marca 2024). The publicly available online comments were also manually collected and coded and anonymised at every stage of the research.

Thematic analysis (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006; Moria Maguire and Brid Delahunt 2017) was used to identify key patterns and themes. This method also proved useful in comparing the content of online discussions before and after the “moral shock” and generating insights into how lay discourses shifted over the duration of the drama concerning gender-based inequality and violence in football, as well as vernacular discourses of women’s football, sexual abuse, and (anti)feminism (see Appendix 1).

First, the research team, led by the first author, familiarised itself with the data by reading and re-reading the collected statements and online responses. In this process, we took some written notes to capture our early impressions. Second, we generated initial

codes by coding segments of data that were relevant, or which captured an interesting dynamic related to gender-based violence, (anti)feminism, and women's football. In the third stage, we generated preliminary themes. The fourth step involved reviewing of these themes across the different data sources and a comparison between the content of tweets and online comments in the digital newspaper sources. Here, we also observed recurring patterns which allowed us to compare dominant and salient discourses at different stages of the social drama. As we shall demonstrate next, there were interesting shifts in attitude across the data set concerning gender-based violence, (anti)feminism, and women's football in Spain. In our final stage of data analysis, we compared the content of pre-"breach" (1) themes (based on data from September 2022) with the dominant themes that emerged from the data set during the crisis stage (2) (August and September 2023), and themes that emerged during the redressive process (3) (March 2024). X data were also compared with digital data collected from Marca (see [Appendix 1](#)).

Next, we present our findings based on three key processes: the unfolding of the social drama, the focus shift in form of violence (from subjective to objective), and the mobilisation of anti-feminist and misogynistic responses.

Analysis and discussion

A social drama unfolds

The relationship between Spain women's national football team and the RFEF has long been marked by controversies and scandals, and the non-consensual kiss constituted the "breach" (1) of a social drama (Turner 1988). The first stage was initiated during the medal ceremony when the then RFEF president grabbed Hermoso by her head and kissed her on the lips in front of her teammates (who were also on the presentation platform); the opposing team (who were on the field and had already received their medals); members of the Spanish royal family; thousands of people in the stadium, and a global television audience. With this unsolicited and thus non-consensual kiss, Rubiales broke "a rule [. . .] in a public setting" (Turner 1990, 8) and a social drama erupted both in Spain and worldwide. Despite Rubiales' and some journalists' efforts to try to prevent the social drama from reaching its second, crisis, stage, the first by insulting those who criticised his abusive act, and some journalists by downplaying and/or trivialising it, a few hours later, the social drama entered into its second phase.

The crisis stage (2) devolved rapidly. Within hours, several news stories were published by Spanish and international press sources, and the unsolicited kiss was shown repeatedly on TV programmes, and discussed over and over on radio programmes. It also became the subject of in-person and online discourse by thousands of people worldwide. The crisis reached a peak between 21st and August 25 2023. During this period, many different protagonists issued statements, including Rubiales, the RFEF, female footballers, the Spanish president Pedro Sanchez, members of parliament and other political leaders, feminist organisations, and Hermoso. Following the initial breach, these conflicts and differences in attitude became apparent, creating social distance between groups and representing clashes of interest.

In several statements, Rubiales sought to defend and legitimise his actions, as well as to maintain a sense of privilege as RFEF president. He also allegedly sought to

pressure some RFEF members to make false statements on behalf of Hermoso. With the help of others, including the then-national team coach, Jorge Vilda, Rubiales tried to ensure that Hermoso agreed publicly with his statements. The RFEF issued a statement accusing Hermoso of lying about the past events and of having being “abducted,” that is to say, unduly influenced by the union representing professional footballers (FutPro) (El Independiente 2023). Several national and international agents and athletes also spoke out during this stage of crisis, clarifying their stances in the social drama (see Issy Ronald, Martin Goillandeu, Al Goodman and Kevin Dotson 2023). On 28 August, regional soccer presidents asked Rubiales to resign and, elsewhere, Rubiales’ mother locked herself up in a church in Motril, a Mediterranean coastal town, and announced a hunger strike in protest at what she regarded as the “unfair” treatment of her son (Marca, 2023). This stage of crisis was also marked by silence from Spanish male football players (Marina Prats 2023).

Mass protests ensued, in-person and online, in support of Hermoso while also calling for the resignation of Rubiales. They were led by feminist organisations and protests took place in Madrid and other cities on August 28 2023 (El País, 2023a). X was a prominent platform for this online social drama. Many used the social media platform to state their position, comment on the events, and show support for Hermoso as well as the rest of the team. #SeAcabó [“enough is enough”] became a viral hashtag on X. It was also adopted in street demonstrations after Alexia Putellas, two-time Ballon d’Or winner and Hermoso’s colleague and friend, shared the hashtag on her X account (María Ramírez 2024). During this stage of crisis, Rubiales largely became a symbol of male chauvinism, unprofessional conduct and abuses of power. Subsequent questions were asked by the public regarding the RFEF’s reputation, its lack of transparency and processes of accountability (see Borja García 2024). Nationally and internationally, Hermoso became a symbol of feminist resistance, and the Spanish women’s team came to represent feminism, women’s empowerment, and female solidarity.

The social drama entered a phase of “redress” (3) on August 26 2023 when Rubiales was provisionally suspended by FIFA’s Disciplinary Committee (FIFA 2023). During this phase, the attitude of the RFEF turned dramatically, and the national association issued an apology on September 5 2023 (El País 2023b). Without mentioning Hermoso (which is an example of “herasure” (Kate Manne 2020)), the association apologised to “the world of football and society as a whole,” described Rubiales’ conduct as “inappropriate,” and expressed its commitment to ensuring that these types of “acts” would not happen again (El País 2023b). On 6 September, the RFEF dismissed Vilda as the national team coach and named Montse Tomé as his successor. The redress phase was also characterised by the instigation of a judicial process against Rubiales for the crimes of sexual assault and coercion (Alejandro Gutiérrez 2023). On 27 September, the judge of the National Court cited Vilda and Albert Luque (former RFEF marketing director) as defendants (BBC 2023). On May 8 2024, the judge agreed to open an oral trial against Rubiales for the non-consensual kiss and coercion, and against Vilda and Luque for alleged coercion of Hermoso (Europa Press 2024). At the writing, in July 2024, this judicial process has not ended, and the redressive phase of this social drama is ongoing.

It is important to note that Turner’s stages of social drama overlap, as is the case with many other phases of social life. Therefore, we can already observe some signs of reintegration and schisms (4), and of “ebbing/revivification” (5) (Cottle 2008) in this social

drama. Some important changes have occurred within the RFEF and women's football in Spain which, using Turner's schema, can be understood as (practical) "actions of restorative peace" (1988, 34). For example, on October 23 2023, the Spain women's national football team, the Higher Sports Council (CSD), and the RFEF agreed to create a Joint Commission to improve players' conditions and better promote women's football. However, players have repeatedly complained that their demands remain unfulfilled (David Menayo 2023). On April 18 2024, Aitana Bonmatí stated that "things have not changed [...] we are having the same problems as always [...]" (BBC 2024). Thus, although we see signs of "restorative peace," players' statements also point to the existence of a "schism" between parties in which the "disturbed social group" – female footballers—has not been fully reintegrated (Turner 1988, 34).

Furthermore, the international scale of the social drama is showing some signs of ebbing/revivification (5) (Cottle 2008). On April 13 2024, Brazilian women's team Santos protested against the decision to rehire the former male coach, Kleiton Lima, who had been accused of sexual and moral harassment by several athletes (Filo.news, 2024). The protest made national and international headlines and was deemed effective as Lima resigned from his position two days later. For these reasons, we argue that the social drama unleashed at the end of the Women's World Cup 2023 marked a turning point in women's sport, both in Spain and internationally, especially in relation to changing levels of acceptance concerning gender-based violence in football, sport and society.

The next section shows how, over the course of this yet ongoing social drama, the focus shifted from subjective to objective violence which involved some greater acknowledgement of the acts of violence against women in sport.

The focus shifts: from subjective to objective violence

In Spain, the relationship between women footballers and the RFEF has long been marked by objective and subjective violence. Like many other international football associations, the RFEF neither recognised women in football, particularly international football, nor permitted a Spanish team to compete in the first unofficial Women's World Cup, the Copa 71, which was held in Mexico in 1971 (Suzanne Wrack 2022). Even though UEFA had recommended that all federations in Europe developed women's football in their countries in 1972, it took more than a decade (i.e., 1983) for the RFEF to finally recognise women's football and establish the official Spain women's national football team. The recognition of women's football did not shift the unequal power relations that continue to exist in the game and, instead, institutionalised them in terms of poorer resources, subordinate roles for women in football, and a general dismissal of the women's game.

Between 1988 and 2015, Ignacio Quereda was coach and manager of the Spanish national women's team. The length of this term was criticised by many in the game and was cited as an example of the indifference shown to women's football. During this time, the relationship between the RFEF and the women's national team members can be characterised as one of domination and (objective and symbolic) violence. Women's football in Spain was relatively invisible in comparison to the men's game, and the strong influence of the RFEF meant that any violence faced by female players was either rendered lesser, or (in)visible, and/or considered unimportant. Reports contend that since 1996 the RFEF was aware of abusive behaviour by Quereda towards national team

players, but the association did not act on it for nearly two decades (I Trujillo 2021). However, the situation changed after the early elimination of the national team from the 2015 Women's World Cup. Some female footballers publicly complained about Quereda's lack of professionalism, poor quality coaching, and abusive behaviour (Trujillo 2021). These criticisms captured the media and public attention and resulted in the coach's resignation on July 30 2015. In 2021, the extent of abuse directed at generations of players by Quereda for nearly three decades was revealed in the release of a book (*No las llames chicas, llámalas futbolistas* [Don't call them girls, call them footballers], Danae Boronat, 2021) and a documentary (*Romper el Silencio: La lucha de las futbolistas de la selección* [Breaking the silence: The struggle of the female national team's footballers]). Still, while such episodes of subjective violence carried out by the former coach (i.e., insults, humiliations, homophobic and misogynistic speech, body-shaming, highly-controlling behaviour, and physical violence such as grabbing players' ears and cheeks) garnered public attention, the objective violence exercised by the RFEF remained largely invisible until the social drama of the 2023 World Cup.

Whilst the breach (1) was centred on an episode of subjective violence—the unsolicited kiss—in the crisis stage (2), several organisations and individuals consciously grasped the opportunity to address and expose the backdrop of objective violence against which the non-consensual kiss occurred.¹ The women's football union, FUTPRO, argued that male chauvinism was a “structural problem” in Spanish sport and stressed that female footballers experienced it daily (Elena Omedes 2023). Feminist organisations in Spain also drew attention to forms of sexism and demanded further measures beyond Rubiales' dismissal (Silvia Blanco, Isabel Valdés and Nadia Tronchoni 2023). For instance, some demanded a stronger female presence on the boards of governing bodies of sport and as members of technical teams within national women's football. Along with condemnations of the sexual assault, political figures and parties in Spain also played a significant role in revealing the objective violence that female players and women's football face in Spain (Blanco, Valdés, and Tronchoni 2023). Hermoso addressed this objective violence when she announced her decision not to play in the national team as long as the then leadership remained unchanged (Hermoso 2023). This demand placed questions of responsibility and accountability beyond a lone or single aggressor (Rubiales) and to the level of the national football association. The Spanish women's national football team players also tried to highlight objective and systematic violence by stressing that the non-consensual kiss was not a “one-time” thing (Putellas 2023) and demanding “structural changes” in the RFEF.

International football clubs, players and organisations also focused attention from subjective to objective violence and on the need for structural reform of women's football in Spain (and internationally). The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, issued a statement in support of Hermoso, denouncing the sexual harassment and abuse that women athletes face and calling for the end abuse and sexism in sport (News Room 2023). The Lionesses, the English national women's team, issued an official statement in support of Hermoso and described the RFEF as a “sexist and patriarchal organisation” (Sky News 2023).

Before the incident and ensuing crisis, most tweets that we analysed for this research demonstrated support for and admiration toward the 15 female footballers who had issued a statement complaining about the RFEF in September 2022. In that statement

they asked not to be selected for the national team until changes to playing conditions and the selection of coaches were introduced (RFEF 2022). However, although these online statements stressed female footballers' professionalism (in face of criticism that had framed their complaints as "childish behaviour"), they did not engage in a feminist critique of the RFEF and/or of the structural inequality in Spanish women's football.

By the summer of 2023, there were many more digital responses that mirrored feminist critiques of the RFEF and women footballers' situation in Spain. The politicisation and intensification of online feminist critique in women's football was also captured, visually, in the use of the purple heart on X, which replaced the red hearts used in September 2022. The heart in a colour associated with feminism and the feminist movement, went viral in online conversations on the non-consensual kiss in X. Several tweets denounced structural inequality and discrimination against women and condemned the mass-mediated sexual assault on Hermoso. In short, our research of online discussions before and after the moral shock reveals how the development of this social drama heightened the (feminist) politicisation of women's football, which served to uncover the violence endured by female athletes and women more broadly.

During the first stages of the crisis, the RFEF actively denied accusations of the sexual assault of Hermoso by Rubiales (i.e., subjective violence). Many members of the RFEF publicly supported Rubiales' version that the kiss was consensual and/or "unimportant," and even applauded him when he claimed to be the victim of a "witch-hunt" and accused his opponents of "false feminism" (Pacheco 2023). Once the national and international pressure had made the defence of Rubiales and the trivialisation of the sexual assault untenable, the RFEF changed its position by criticising Rubiales and issuing a formal apology. Still, the RFEF has neither recognised Hermoso as a victim of sexual assault (subjective violence) nor has it accepted any criticism of the longstanding discrimination against women footballers (i.e., objective violence). Furthermore, its signalling of Rubiales as a "bad apple" and of a single episode of subjective violence allows it to remain (largely) unchanged (see also García 2024). For these reasons, the creation of the Joint Commission to explore players' conditions could also be viewed as a partly calculated move from the RFEF to cleanse its image and maintain control over the meanings given to discrimination and inequality in women's football in Spain.

A reactionary moral shock online: anti-feminist responses

A third dimension of this moral shock, and of the social drama which ensued, were digital reactionary and anti-feminist responses. These counter-mobilisations mirror those of other feminist research on anti-feminist and misogynistic discourses (e.g., Sarah Banet-Weiser 2021; Nerea Boneta Sadaba, Elisa García-Mingo and Sergio Tomás 2024; Michael Kimmel 2013; Ann-Kathrin Rothermel 2020). Paying attention to the reactionary responses that emerge in the unfolding of a social drama is important because it can provide valuable insights into the interdependent dynamics of social permanence and social change, in this case concerning inequality in football. This section outlines the main counter-narratives identified in our analysis of official statements and online discussions before and after the social drama erupted in the northern summer of 2023.

In our dataset, anti-feminist and misogynistic statements were concentrated in the digital comment section of Marca while feminist reactions accumulated on X. Animosity

was directed at Hermoso and the national women's team in digital fora connected to Marca, and this animosity increased over time. This increase may be akin to the formation of manospheres (Garcia-Mingo and Diaz-Fernandez, 2023; Rothermel 2020) on virtual sites where users' identity is easier to conceal, and sexist and misogynistic statements are less likely to be challenged by other individuals.

It should be noted that digital anti-feminist discourses existed prior to the social drama (i.e., September 2022). These focused on the "inferiority" and "unworthiness" of women's football, on the perceived "lack of professionalism" in women's football, and on women's "childish" behaviour. Players were discredited, infantilised and sportswomen's empowerment was devalued. The infantilisation of players and accusations of a lack of professionalism were also strategies used by the RFEF to discredit players' grievances (Bonmatí 2022). Digital discourses described some of the players as "capricious" and "spoilt girls," accused them of having a "diva complex," and not acting with "professionalism" (as male players do). For instance, an online user wrote on X:

I think it is the most childish and unprofessional act I have ever seen in my life. They are privileged [...] and yet they do not value it in the slightest. And that is all there is to say.

Our analysis of these digital discourses after "the breach" (1) also reveals anti-feminist strategies such as the trivialisation and banalisation of sexual abuse by describing the assault as an unimportant "little kiss" (i.e., "piquito") and players as having exaggerated the harm and/or having had a "disproportionate" response. Sexual exploitation was also normalised in these online conversations which portrayed Hermoso as a liar, a manipulator, and someone seeking personal gain (i.e., money and fame). For example, an online user referred to Hermoso as a "fake woman," an online statement demanded jail sentences for women who lie, and a comment suggested that Hermoso was not a real victim as she was "organizing parties in Ibiza to overcome the trauma the next day." These descriptors constitute common tropes that "support rape culture (normalising, excusing and/or marginalising sexual violence) by casting doubt on the claims, trivialising the issue (often through jokes), and/or engaging in victim-blame" (Deb Waterhouse-Watson 2019, 28).

Mocking Rubiales, supporting Hermoso, and portraying him as a victim were the three main online reactions we identified following Rubiales' resignation statement released on September 10 2023 on X (Rubiales, 2023). It is important to stress that the fact that most tweets mocking Rubiales did not engage in a feminist critique and/or acknowledgement of the sexual assault could have the effect of reinforcing "herasure" (Manne 2020), and normalising and/or trivialising abuse as both his actions and the victim of his actions are ignored (or pushed to the background) in online banter. For instance, a significant number of online jokes on X only focused on his baldness and supposed digital illiteracy.

His own efforts, and those of this mother, to construct himself as a victim of media and "fake feminism" (Pacheco 2023) may well have played a part in online comments that portrayed him as a victim. Many of these tweets displayed "himpathy," i.e., "the disproportionate or inappropriate sympathy extended to a male perpetrator over his similarly or less privileged female targets or victims, in cases of sexual assault, harassment, and other misogynistic behaviour" (Manne 2020, 37). For example, one online users posted on X:

“The persecution that you suffer, tomorrow we can all suffer, thanks to the crazy women [. . .]. Have balls. Do it for all the men.” And another one stated:

The way in which they have thrown you out is despicable, Mr. Rubiales. There is no right to the harassment and demolition to which they are subjecting you for a peak in a moment of celebration and euphoria. [. . .]

Online discourses in Marca in March 2024 also featured the trope of “ruined lives,” according to which male abusers become the “real victims” whilst women “become the perpetrators, the ones responsible for ‘ruining’ their lives, their good names, their reputations” (Banet-Weiser 2021, 76). For example, an online comment stated:

As things stand, there will come a time when one will have to go with a contract for the woman to sign before kissing her, in case she changes her mind, and you can get out of jail. [sic]

One secondary theme also emerged in digital discourses in September 2022, that of “discriminatory and/or unfair feminism,” which intensified over the course of the social drama and the subsequent moral shock. In the summer of 2023, some online users suggested the idea that Rubiales was a victim of “extremist feminism” and/or “feminazis” (for instance, some individuals employed the hashtag #Feminazi). This theme, together with the “banalisation of abuse,” became the dominant narrative in online discussions in Marca in March 2024. Many online users attacked feminism and feminist ideas, describing them as “radical,” “extremist” and/or “totalitarian.” For instance, an online user posted the following text: “Feminist man: when everything falls on you and you no longer have rights, remember it was you.” Another online comment stated:

Thank goodness I live in the UK, but when I go to Spain [. . .] every time I meet [a woman], I put my phone on to record, I panic, when I return to the UK it goes away, there is no gender laws [sic].²

In these individuals’ eyes, Spanish men were subjected to unequal conditions, lacking basic rights and freedoms, and living in danger from institutionalised “extremist feminism” that systematically criminalised men and favoured women. Rubiales’ prosecution for sexual assault, we argue, intensified the reactionary moral shock among anti-feminist and/or misogynistic individuals and groups who reinforced “himpathy” and rape culture online. Importantly, it resulted in the trivialisation and denial of gender-based inequality and violence—narratives that far-right and ultra-conservative politicians and political parties have been spreading both in Spain and internationally over the last decade (see Boneta Sadaba, García-Mingo, and Tomás 2024). These responses were also enabled by Rubiales’ words and actions and by members of the RFEF who clapped and offered him public support when Rubiales said he was not going to resign in August 2023 (Pacheco 2023). By reversing notions of victimhood with affective-discourse (see Rothermel 2020) and discrediting female athletes, anti-feminist individuals and groups sought to disempower women, and deny the existence of sexual inequality and gender-based violence. In so doing, subjective violence was trivialised, and objective violence endured by (sports) women was rendered hidden by them. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that, even if the far-right party (Vox) tried to capitalise on it, these reactionary mobilisations were mostly relegated to online spaces and did not gain a prominent space in the wider public sphere where the social drama mainly unravelled.

Conclusion

Our article stresses the usefulness of adopting a layered conceptualisation of violence to shed light on the (mediated) experiences and challenges that women athletes face and examine gender inequality in sport and society in general. The article also shows how the concepts of “social drama” and “moral shock” offer original analytical schemes to investigate public reactions to gender-based violence and broader social processes of resistance and change. Our article reveals how the unfolding of a highly mediated social drama enabled more subtle (objective) violence, long endured by female athletes, to be brought into public discourse debate and, in doing so, boosted demands for social change in Spain and internationally. Future research should analyse the complex relations of subjective and objective violence and their mediated visibility from an intersectional perspective. Adopting the concepts of “moral shock” and “social drama” in feminist research offers new ways to explore the complexity of public rituals and dynamics of social continuity and change. Research should investigate when a moral shock is potent enough to trigger a social drama and explore when and why certain instances of gender-based violence become normalised, while others lack the power to mobilize potential agents. Scholars could elaborate a genealogy of moral shocks from a feminist perspective in order to examine the changing threshold of acceptability of misogynistic and gender-based violence. When and why does a social drama start, come to an end, and/or not develop any further? How can social dramas help us advance towards gender equality and social justice? Our paper argues that examining “reactionary moral shocks” is equally pressing to understand anti-feminist agents and social and institutional obstacles that prevent (feminist) redressive action in sport and society more broadly.

Notes

1. Subjective and objective violence are not completely separated but should (most often) be understood as interconnected. For instance, a racially motivated assault (subjective violence) is inseparable from the systemic and symbolic violence (objective violence) that racialised individuals and communities endure in a racist society.
2. Note that apart from containing false information on legislation in the UK, recording a person without their consent is potentially a crime.

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Appendix 1

Timeline	X (positive themes towards female players)	X (negative themes towards female players)	Marca online (positive themes towards female players)	Marca online (negative themes towards female players)
Pre-breach stage (September 2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Support for female players (including the red heart emoticon) -Admiration of female players (including red heart emoticon) -Professionalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Unprofessionalism -Infantilisation -Against women's football -Diva complex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -RFEF's unprofessionalism -Female players' professionalism -Female players' right to complain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Inferiority/unworthiness of women's football -Infantilisation -Unfair/discriminatory feminism
Crisis stage (August-September 2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Feminist critique: Subjective violence; Structural inequality/objective violence -Feminist viral hashtags and emoticons (i.e., #SeAcabó, purple hearts) -Mocking Rubiales and jokes (<i>herasure</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Critique of the politicisation of football -Banalisation of sexual abuse -Liar/false victimhood -Inferiority of women's football -<i>Himpathy</i> (e.g., #TeamRubiales) -Extremist feminism (e.g., #Feminazi) 		
Redressive phase (March 2024)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Against sexual abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Banalisation of sexual abuse and rape culture -Male victimhood/men without rights -Anti-feminism (and "extremist" feminism) -Against institutions -Liar/false victimhood