

Soccer kiss scandal exposes how structural sexism in Spain can be a laughing matter

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Amid [expressions of outrage and disgust](#) over a [nonconsensual kiss](#) between the male head of Spanish soccer and a Women's World Cup-winning player, there was also laughter.

Luis Rubiales, the now ex-president of the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) and former vice-president of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), was [forced to resign from those leadership positions](#) as a result of the forced kiss on Aug. 20, 2023, which took place in front of a packed stadium in Australia and a global audience. He is also [under investigation by prosecutors](#) in Spain for sexual assault and coercion.

Throughout the high-stakes and painful drama—which dominated Spanish media for weeks on end—there were jokes. The Rubiales kiss became fodder for [internet memes](#), [skits by comedians on Spanish TV](#), as well as many cartoons in national and [international](#) newspapers.

As [scholars of Iberian cultures and gender representation](#), we know that humor, much like soccer, is a national pastime in Spain. Moreover, Rubiales' forced kiss of Jenni Hermoso, a member of [Spain's World Cup-winning team](#), provided a perfect example of the role that comedy can play in unmasking and highlighting structural [sexism](#).

The humor of incongruity

Humor is a social act that reflects human experience and, more to the point here, human folly.

In "[Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor](#)," [social psychologist Leon Rappoport](#) explains that, among other reasons, we laugh at incongruity. Humor is employed, Rappoport observes, to shed light on something "clearly absurd or contradictory."

This appears to be the basis of much of the laughter in the Rubiales case. His outlandish, unexpected and unwanted gestures—not only the kiss, but also [grabbing his crotch](#) while cheering the Spanish women on to their first World Cup win—certainly came across as incongruous.

Much of the humor poked fun at Rubiales directly. While one editorial cartoon published in the digital newspaper *El Español* envisioned him as the [Spanish counterpart of Donald Trump](#), he was widely mocked across the media in posts that [compared him to a brutish Homer Simpson](#).

The former UEFA vice president wasn't the only person to be lampooned. His mother—with her [stranger-than-fiction hunger strike](#) demanding his exoneration—also opened herself up to ridicule. Rubiales' many supporters at the RFEF couldn't escape the farce-fest either. Even those who eventually turned on him were ridiculed, with one editorial cartoon portraying them as rats abandoning [Rubiales' sinking Titanic ship](#).

But some of the jokes called attention to bigger issues. Rubiales' sexism on display at a major sporting event did not reflect well on the country's international reputation, especially at a time when it is [bidding to co-host the 2030 Men's World Cup](#). A humorist from the national newspaper *El Mundo* proposed that a crotch-grabbing Rubiales be adopted as the next World Cup [official mascot](#).

A sexist laughingstock

Such use of comedy takes a page from the book "[A Comedian and an Activist Walk Into a Bar](#)," in which authors Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman discuss how humor can be used as a means to unify, guide public discourse, and inspire action.

It would be too much to claim that the jokes cracked during the fallout of Rubiales' behavior led to his [eventual resignation on Sept. 10](#). But the humor in this case helped amplify public debate and inspired action to confront structural sexism in Spain and beyond.

An example of how it did this can be seen in a parody reenactment of

Rubiales' kiss posted on the social media accounts of a self-fashioned amateur writer who goes by the online name @LolaLaMonyos.

In the sketch, two women impersonate Rubiales and Hermoso and stage the kiss, as [recounted by Rubiales](#) in his public appearance before the RFEF's general assembly. At the Aug. 25 gathering, he did not resign as some had expected. Instead, he defended his "peck" as consensual and positioned himself against both "false feminism" and gender inclusive language.

"When Jenni first showed up, she lifted me up from the ground. She grabbed me by the hips, by the legs, I don't remember well. ... She lifted me up from the ground—and we almost fell down.

"Then the peck happened during all of this celebration, with her patting me on the side a few times and then excusing herself with one more hand on the side and going off laughing," he added.

Those words, set over the spoof reenactment, highlight just how nonsensical Rubiales' imaginative interpretation is. Furthermore, the mismatch of his male voice and the two female bodies in the video points at the pervasive silencing of women and sexist double standards. Since being posted on X, the platform formally known as Twitter, the sketch has been viewed almost 650,000 times.

Taking a somewhat different comedic approach, the popular Spanish satirical TV program "El Intermedio" recast the events in the [style of a wildlife documentary](#). With the title "This turned out so 'cute'"—a play on the Spanish word "mono," which can mean "monkey" or "cute"—the skit uses a collage of monkey clips accompanied by an authoritative male voice-over.

Funny though it is, there are also serious points being made. The writers

of the sketch place the audience in a position of evolved superiority to Rubiales—reveling in the idiocy of the mockumentary's subject.

What's more, the piece suggests that Rubiales' worldview and values are archaic and represent a step back in the fight for gender equality.

We would also argue that the video invites the audience to question patriarchal structures as being synonymous with the advancement of civilization. To us, the message implied is that society needs to redefine such assumptions. A world in which we can excuse harassment, sexual abuse, coercion or discrimination is incompatible with an aspiring civilized society.

None of these humorous responses to the scandal diminish the seriousness of the Rubiales incident, nor the debate they sparked. Rather, they have helped frame the way in which discussions have played out in Spain.

For Rubiales, #itsover

There is no doubt that the recriminations against Rubiales mark a tipping point in Spain's reckoning with abuses of power related to sexual assault and broader gender inequality. For good reason, the [hashtag #seacabó](#)—translating to #itsover—has continued to trend since the scandal, after the term was directed at Rubiales by Spanish soccer star Alexia Putellas. Putellas, a two-time winner of the prestigious Ballon d'Or Féminin and [Best FIFA Women's Player, affirmed in December 2021](#): "True victory will be when there is 100% equal opportunity for boys and girls in sports and in the world."

The implications of the Rubiales tragicomedy have been sweeping and are still developing. It has allowed Spain, and inspired others, to confront discriminatory practices within and beyond the soccer field.

But is it also a laughing matter? We argue yes—because a sense of humor allows us to make sense of incongruities, confront them as a group and advance toward social change.

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