

Luis Rubiales and Spain's Kiss Scandal at the World Cup, Explained

An unwanted kiss cast a pall over the Spanish team's victory at the Women's World Cup. Some are calling it a #MeToo moment for the country and for soccer there.

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When the Spanish women's national soccer team won the World Cup final this month, their compatriots had little time to celebrate before the behavior of the country's top soccer official prompted a controversy over misogyny and sexual assault.

During the ceremony after the team's victory, Luis Rubiales, the president of the Royal Spanish Football Federation, forcibly kissed Jennifer Hermoso, a star forward, on the lips — a move that Ms. Hermoso later described as “an impulse-driven, sexist, out-of-place act without any consent on my part.”

Despite numerous calls for him to resign, Mr. Rubiales has forcefully defended his conduct and insisted that the kiss was consensual. But last weekend, FIFA, the world's top soccer body, suspended him and barred him from contacting Ms. Hermoso. On Monday, Spanish prosecutors opened a criminal investigation into Mr. Rubiales's conduct, and later that day, his own association called on him to step down immediately.

Here is what to know about the events.

What happened?

During a ceremony after Spain's 1-0 victory over England in the final on Aug. 20, Mr. Rubiales kissed Ms. Hermoso on the lips, an act that was captured on video.

In a separate incident, he was filmed grabbing his crotch in a victory gesture, while standing a few feet from Spain's queen and her 16-year-old daughter — for which he later apologized.



Jennifer Hermoso during a World Cup match in New Zealand in July. John Cowpland/Associated Press

Mr. Rubiales initially apologized for kissing Ms. Hermoso but later backtracked, insisting in remarks on Friday that the act had been “spontaneous, mutual, euphoric and consensual.” He also accused his critics of engaging in “false feminism.”

Ms. Hermoso said that she had not consented to the kiss and that she had faced pressure to publicly play down Mr. Rubiales’s actions. She said in a statement on Friday that “no person, in any work, sports, or social setting, should be a victim of these types of nonconsensual behaviors.”

Does Spanish soccer have a sexism problem?

Many in Spain have lamented that the kiss has redirected a jubilant nation’s attention away from the victorious team toward a controversy centered on Mr. Rubiales. But some soccer players and feminist activists have pointed to entrenched sexism in the sport that long predates the scandal.

The previous head coach of the Spanish women’s national team, Ignacio Quereda, was ousted in 2015 amid accusations of sexism. And his successor, Jorge Vilda, has also faced complaints. Last year, more than a dozen players refused to play on the women’s national team amid complaints of unequal pay, intrusive treatment by Mr. Vilda and a general culture of sexism.

Some Spanish commentators and government officials have called the kiss a #MeToo moment for soccer, one of the country’s most entrenched bastions of machismo — a sense of masculine pride and entitlement. Activists have used the slogan “se acabó,” meaning “it’s over,” to call for changes.

“We are ready for this to be the #MeToo of Spanish football and for this to be a change,” Victor Francos Díaz, who directs Spain’s National Sports Council, told reporters on Friday.

Yolanda Díaz, the country’s labor minister, wrote on social media on Monday that “the fight of

female players is that of the whole society.”

Who is Luis Rubiales?

A career soccer player born in the Canary Islands and raised in Motril in southern Spain, Mr. Rubiales, 46, never became a household name as a defender on the field.

But he rose through the ranks off the field, becoming the chief of the Spanish players’ association in 2010 and then head of the federation — Spanish soccer’s governing body, which represents women and men — in 2018.



Mr. Rubiales speaking during an emergency meeting of the Spanish soccer federation in Las Rozas last week. Rfef/Europa Press, via Associated Press

One of Mr. Rubiales’s first decisions after taking charge of the organization was to dismiss the men’s national team coach on the eve of the 2018 World Cup. More recently, an uncle he had appointed to his staff at the federation accused him of using soccer funds for private events, claims that Mr. Rubiales denied.

In a 2022 interview with the Spanish newspaper El País, Mr. Rubiales said the organization had received about 70 “complaints and similar actions” during his tenure. He denied any wrongdoing.

“We have always done everything with the utmost possible scrupulousness as regards the law and our convictions,” Mr. Rubiales told El País at the time.

What has the reaction been in Spain and abroad?

Spain’s main soccer federation, the main union of professional female soccer players and leading politicians, including government ministers, have denounced Mr. Rubiales’s conduct and called for him to resign.

Members of the women's national team, along with dozens of other players, have vowed not to play for Spain "if the current managers continue."

On Monday, Spanish prosecutors said they were investigating the episode as a potential act of sexual assault, a crime punishable under Spanish law by years in prison.



Feminist groups organized a rally in support of Ms. Hermoso in Madrid on Monday. Aldara Zarraoa/Getty Images

The soccer federation that Mr. Rubiales leads initially backed him and issued a statement saying that he "did not lie." But late Monday, after a protracted emergency meeting, it reversed course and called for him to step down, citing "unacceptable behaviors that have seriously damaged the reputation of Spanish football."

On Saturday, FIFA, the world's governing soccer body, said it had suspended Mr. Rubiales while it investigated the episode. FIFA also ordered both Mr. Rubiales and the Spanish soccer federation not to contact Ms. Hermoso.

Mr. Rubiales's mother has been on a hunger strike in a church since Monday, protesting the treatment of her son. On Wednesday, a priest told reporters that she had gone to the hospital because of tiredness and anemic problems.