

Beware the Men Who Double Down

Sept. 9, 2023

By Elizabeth Spiers

Ms. Spiers, a contributing Opinion writer, is a journalist and digital media strategist.

When Luis Rubiales, who on Sunday resigned from his position as the president of Spain's soccer federation, faced global backlash for kissing Jenni Hermoso, a member of the Spanish team that won the Women's World Cup, he did not exhibit remorse or embarrassment. Nor did he when Ms. Hermoso and her teammates announced they would never work with him again. Nor when FIFA, the world soccer authority, suspended him.

Instead he executed a play that has proved to be a winner: He doubled down, insisting that he'd done nothing wrong, that it was mutual and that he was the victim of a "witch hunt." For one moment he offered a begrudging bit of apology, but he quickly walked it back.

There are as many species of misogynists as there are infectious diseases, but Mr. Rubiales — like Donald Trump, who did a similar maneuver when E. Jean Carroll accused him of rape — represents a particularly insidious breed. These men cannot be shamed for their behavior, not even when confronted with irrefutable evidence, because they fundamentally believe it is acceptable. They don't seem to understand that their victim is as human and complex as they are and has a will of her own. That's why they find it so hard to understand that anything short of rape can really be assault.

"He wasn't raping her," Woody Allen recently said in Mr. Rubiales's dubious defense. "It was just a kiss, and she was a friend. What's wrong with that?"

Like countless other women, I can say from experience that this kind of assault is deeply harmful. The injury is not just physical. Acts like these rob women of autonomy over their own bodies, an experience that, even when brief, is disorienting and degrading, as I learned in my early 20s when I was sexually assaulted walking home from work in New York City.

I was on a sidewalk next to a small park, and a man — tall, white, with long hair, dressed casually but neatly in jeans and a T-shirt — was walking toward me. Just as we passed each other, he reached out and grabbed both of my breasts, then kept going. It was early evening, around dusk, and none of the other people on the street were close enough to see what happened.

I stood stunned, frozen in place. For a moment, my brain seemed to reject what had just happened, but my next emotion wasn't what you might expect. It wasn't fear or despair. It was rage.

The man had run away, and when I turned, I could see him at the end of the block. I had a

visceral impulse to chase him and punch him in the face. Even though I am 5-foot-1 and have never punched anyone, in that instant, my rage was so incandescent that had my sense of self-preservation not kicked in, I probably would have attacked him like a feral animal. Instead, I gathered my two still-functioning wits and — disoriented and at a loss for what to do — just went home.

I didn't report the incident, and when I told this story to friends, I referred to the assailant casually as the "boob grabber," which was a way of wrapping the experience in a gauze of nonchalance that made it seem less straightforwardly horrible. I played it as minor, maybe even something that could be laughed off. I was raped in college, and I rationalized to myself that the assault by the park was relatively trivial in comparison.

Yet the first time I told a friend about what had happened by the park, I went home and cried because I felt so humiliated. In the instant after it happened I felt dehumanized, an object that my assailant could make use of however he wanted. I imagine that is precisely how he viewed me and anyone else he might have assaulted.

There are many men who quietly or overtly view women as lesser — less intelligent, less capable, less resilient. The double-downers are worse. They don't give women credit even for being lesser versions of men; they simply view them as bodies that exist for their pleasure and use. In this, they are no different from my assailants.

Shortly after the incident on the soccer field, Ms. Hermoso said that she did not like the kiss. The next day she said the kiss was "no big deal." But since then, she has been unequivocal: She says she was a "victim of an attack" and has filed a criminal complaint against Mr. Rubiales.

I wonder if her sequence of emotions was the same as what I felt when a stranger grabbed my breasts: shock, followed by anger, followed by a rational assessment that lashing out would result in worse consequences. Ms. Hermoso has said that she was initially pressured to defend the kiss and protect Mr. Rubiales. I wonder if, at the time, she questioned whether the kiss mattered or tried to convince herself that it wasn't a big deal. She obviously concluded that it was, and despite heavy pressure to downplay it, she demanded that Mr. Rubiales be held accountable.

Men like Mr. Rubiales and Mr. Trump very often have a cadre of defenders, people willing to say that these things aren't a big deal. Most of them probably consider themselves reasonable. Some defenders will tolerate abhorrent behavior because of what the men seem to offer — leadership, some extraordinary ability or another expression of power. Others defend these actions because they, too, believe women's bodies are, on some level, always the property of men, in which an occasional, supposedly lesser violation of consent can be disregarded. "He wasn't raping her. It was just a kiss."

The double-downers offer a test for how much abuse society thinks a woman should tolerate, especially from someone in a position of relative power. They encourage others to widen the sphere of what's acceptable when it comes to mistreating women. They do it with confidence and model an extreme entitlement with few consequences. And so they ensure it will happen again.

Elizabeth Spiers, a contributing Opinion writer, is a journalist and digital media strategist.