

Argentina's feminist movement confronts Diego Maradona

Monday 14 December 2020, by [MONTEAGUDO Graciela](#) (Date first published: 5 December 2020).

Argentina's feminist movement is grappling with the death of Diego Maradona, the popular football hero with a history of violence against women.

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November 25 is the International Day Against Domestic Violence. On this very day, Diego Maradona, the Argentine millionaire and slum-born footballer, a man of color known for his violence against women, died at home of a heart attack.

Paradoxically, several prominent leaders of [Ni Una Menos](#) (Not One Less), the prominent Latin American collective of journalists, authors and scholar-activists against gender violence, along with other powerful feminists in Argentina, chose to publicly mourn Maradona's passing — forcing decolonial, popular feminisms into uncharted territory.

The quasi-sainthood status that Maradona has achieved through his death is connected to his rise from Villa Fiorito, the slum where he was born, to the life of a millionaire. Fans of Maradona point out that his spectacular career gave hope to millions of slum dwellers who felt encouraged by his success. Upon his death, they have represented Maradona as an imperfect human — just like all of us — who still managed to have power and money, sending the message that it is not impossible to triumph over brutal poverty.

Yet his history of violence against women is well documented. Over 30 years ago, Maradona married Claudia Villafañe, with whom he had two children. Twenty years later, he acknowledged an Italian son, born while he was married to Villafañe. Only after long and protracted legal battles, did Maradona recognize the three children he had with his former girlfriend, Verónica Ojeda. There are presently six ongoing paternity lawsuits.

Maradona's violence was not limited to abandoning children and their mothers. Decades after their divorce, Villafañe took Maradona to court on charges of psychological violence and harassment. His violence also took the form of blows against his girlfriends. One ex-girlfriend, Rocío Oliva, captured an episode on video. Without denying the authenticity of the video, Maradona commented: "I am not a batterer, but Rocío deserved to have her head ripped off."

Complicating Argentine Feminisms

Maradona's death disrupts the uneasy co-existence of a feminist movement with white and middle-

class origins that is now based in the barrios and the slums.

Argentina's military dictatorship (1976-1983) paved the way for the IMF structural adjustment programs that subjected the population to mass unemployment and poverty. At one point, unemployment rose to almost 25 percent. For many poor women, poverty and unemployment forced the commoning of individual resources and reproductive labor. It was these women working within unemployed organizations, the *piqueteras*, who organized massive roadblocks that eventually forced the World Bank to implement unemployment plans.

This commoning of reproductive labor helped denaturalize the gendered nature of reproductive work. The movement opened space to reflect on what was involved in care and maternity, including abortion, poverty and violence at home. The *piqueteras* started attending the *Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres* (National Women's Gathering), an annual meeting of feminist collectives. There, they began to articulate a feminist critique of their situation, identifying violence against women as one of the most important issues in their lives.

One pillar of the feminisms based in the barrios and shanties is the claim for a non-punitive, community-based approach to macho violence. Years ago, the *piqueteras* created support groups which intervened in the homes of women experiencing abuse. Groups of men and women would talk with the aggressor, and if conversations did not change his behavior, they would force the man out of the home and protect the women and children. They never called the police.

Similar to many BIPOC communities in the US, popular feminists in Argentina try to keep the state out of their homes through alternative forms of prevention. Popular feminists in Argentina decode *macho* violence by men of color against their partners within the context of men of color's historic dispossession and emasculation by colonial powers and white supremacy. Emasculated by neocolonial modernity's white supremacist oppression, *machos* in the South beat and murder women to prove their masculinity to the powerful men that oppress them. The feminized body, marked by violence and less powerful than the neoliberal state that emasculated him, is a territory to be conquered, to be forced into submission through violence.

When the popular — but violent — Maradona died, the deep political differences and approaches within this alliance came to a head. Sectors of the feminist movement that expressed outrage over Maradona's enthronement were harshly silenced. The feminist movement split violently on social media, with accusations that Ni Una Menos leaders were privileging football, politics and populist state-oriented politics over women's lives. This was countered with accusations of racism and classism by women — many of whom are themselves white and middle-class — who have started calling themselves "Maradonian feminists."

Who Are The "Maradonian" Feminists?

So-called "Maradonian" feminists are often left-leaning former autonomists or represent leadership of the Trotskyist parties within national and state parliaments. With the exception of the Trotskyists, they critically support President Alberto Fernández, a Peronist who inherited a country deeply in debt from the previous, neoliberal administration, and who is currently embattled by the economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Already managing the complicated situation of economic strictures imposed by the IMF, Fernandez has tried to capitalize on Maradona's passing by declaring three days of national mourning. To cap it off, the government organized a state funeral for Maradona at the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace in front of the iconic Plaza de Mayo. Poorly planned, the funeral ended hastily with police

repressing crowds that broke into the Casa Rosada.

The Maradonian feminists do not deny accusations of violence against Maradona. Rather, they attempt to attribute his violence to his upbringing in violent poverty.

However, contrary to the experience of most poor people living in slums, Maradona became close to power early in his life. He was still a teenager when he was promoted and celebrated by the military dictatorship. At a time when they were kidnapping, torturing and disappearing other leftists, the government organized events to celebrate Maradona's success.

During the 1990s, President Carlos Menem, a Peronist whose economic and social policies plunged Argentina into neoliberal distress, attended Maradona's wedding and was often photographed with the footballer. In later years, Maradona's staunch support of Cuba, where he lived for five years, along with his championing of populist governments in the region, instilled an aura of leftism that does not fit comfortably with the size of his estate, which is estimated at around \$1 billion.

Maradonian feminists have tried to justify their pardon of his violent and misogynist behavior by digging deep into feminist history and theory. For example, in 1988, boxing champion Carlos Monzón beat his ex-wife Alicia Muñoz to death and radical feminists successfully organized to put him in jail. When the news broke, Monzón had claimed that although they had been fighting, she had thrown herself off the balcony in a fit of "hysteria." After Maradona's death, one woman on social media defining herself as "a pioneer feminist," claimed that in those days they lacked a "decolonial, popular" feminist analysis. Now they understood that growing up in violent poverty generates violence, she asserted. Rather than bring up his violence, feminists should "accompany" the people in their pain.

An anti-punitive, decolonial approach would perhaps gain more traction if there were state support for community-based organizations. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. On the contrary, the newly created Ministry of Women, Genders and Sexual Diversities, which was formed to address the increase of domestic violence during the pandemic lockdown, has been ineffective. Given the completely inadequate government response to this serious issue, many feminists see the appearance of a black ribbon on their webpage in observance of Maradona's state-mandated mourning as a symbol of the government's utter disregard for the purported aim of protecting women's lives.

Toward Decolonial, Community-Based Justice

Non-Maradonian feminists including anarchists and Trotskyists without parliamentary presence, differ in their approach to other issues regarding transgender identities and other matters, but agree that solutions are necessary to build communities that value and respect human life. They maintain that public mourning and commemoration of a violent man constitutes a leap from a non-punitive approach to the blank pardon of violence against women.

Indeed, without a community-based process where Maradona could have had the opportunity to acknowledge his violence and seek support to change his behavior, his public mourning by important sectors of the feminist movement constitutes a step backwards in the fight to eradicate violence against women. This is deeply concerning in a country where a woman is killed every 36 hours.

A non-punitive, autonomous approach has the potential to heal the communities, because this process can only begin to happen within and by the communities themselves. A punitive, state-based approach will not solve this issue because violence against women is the result of violent masculinity

developed under a hegemony of colonization and furthered by neoliberalism. By focusing on building community to save women's lives, men can start constructing new, non-oppressive masculinities.

But through the blank pardon of Maradona's violence without a community-based process of acknowledgment and healing, Maradonian feminists have mobilized to sustain a hegemony of populist state-based, male dominated politics. The image of the populist hero, friendly to both "the people" and populist governments across Latin America, is built over the bruised bodies of the women who were told to idolize the footballer and minimize his violent behavior.

The rise from poverty to riches is a nation-building myth similar to the American Dream. Rather than empowering those born in the slums, Maradonians have constructed a myth of economic progress that few will ever be able to achieve, further complicating progress toward a powerful community-based, anti-punitive approach to *macho* violence.

Precisely on the day that should have been devoted to protesting violence against women, the message society has received is not that anybody can rise from the slums to wealth, but rather that wealthy, powerful men can beat their partners without consequence.

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