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Women, politics and gender in Argentine football clubs. An ethnographic approach to the gender area of Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata

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Women, politics and gender in Argentine football clubs. An ethnographic approach to the *gender area* of Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata¹.

Julia Hang

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the emergency and consolidation of the *gender area* of Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata club, in the context of the advancement of feminism and women's movement in Argentina.

Based on the ethnographic field work with the women who created the *gender area* in 2018, I intend to comprehend how a group of female members and supporters of Gimnasia organize politically in the club with the aim of eradicating structural machismo and introducing gender perspective among its leaders, supporters, athletes and members. They mobilize the repertoire of feminism, based on the notions of horizontality and equality, in the football world structured around the logic of *aguante* that promotes a conception of football rivalry in terms of enmity, and that is crossed by notions such as bravery, honour and manliness.

The article allows to illuminate how football becomes an object of dispute for feminism Argentine feminism. In the context of a broader social movement that refers to the Argentine women's movement in relation to the broader process of conquering women's rights in the region, the dispute for the right to play, narrate, direct and manage football has gained great prominence.

¹ I appreciate the careful reading and enriching comments on this text to Brenda Elsey, Jimoh Shehu, Joseph Weiler, Michele Krech and all the colleagues that participated in Football Feminism Global Governance Perspectives symposium at NYU. My contact info: julita.hang@gmail.com

1. Introduction

September 8th 2019 was a historic day for fans of Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata. Diego Armando Maradona, the greatest idol of Argentine football, debuted as coach of the *Lobo*² men's team, a club of the Argentine football first division, about to descend into the second division. Gimnasia never won a championship in the professional league, and its supporters are characterized by the unconditional love offered to their team, which returns few joys³. Maradona's arrival in Gimnasia was a dream for fans, a respite in their history of suffering. The city of La Plata, a college city of almost one million inhabitants, who divides their football passion between their two great clubs, Gimnasia and Estudiantes, was revolutionized by the arrival of Maradona. Journalists from around the world came to the city to cover *Diego's*⁴ debut and fans from all over the country travelled to see their idol. Gimnasia received in only three days 5000 new members who began to approach the club a few days earlier due to the rumours of Maradona's arrival and greatly increased the sale of T-shirts, obtaining substantial income for a club whose economy is in a deep deficit. The *Maradona phenomenon*, which has been the subject of sociological literature, to which even symposia have been dedicated at national universities, came to this club of La Plata, changing the club's life and its fans forever.

Maradona is for Argentine society one of its biggest national heroes. Contradictory and controversial, according to Pablo Alabarces, one of the social scientists who has most researched about the importance of the player in the national culture, Maradona was the exclusive figure in the patriotic narrative for at least two decades (2013: 34). The author argues that this is due a combination of traits on which the heroic narrative is articulated: his gender condition (Maradona is a heterosexual male) and class (of popular origin). He is also an exceptional player, who made two unique goals against England in 1986, four years after the Malvinas Islands War in which both countries faced each other. That football game was read by a wide part of Argentine society as the continuity of such warfare, in which those who had defeated us in the war were defeated by Maradona.

² Because its stadium is in the middle of the forest of the city of La Plata, Gimnasia is popularly known as El Lobo (The wolf). In this text, native words will be in italics.

³ Indeed, in its long life history, Gimnasia won only two titles: in 1929 (when football was still amateur) and the Centennial Cup in 1994

⁴ In this article we will refer to Diego Maradona as Maradona, Diego or El Diez -the ten- (by the number that the player wore on his shirt). In all these ways it is popularly known by the Argentine fans.

Retired from his career as a player, he has been the coach of multiple teams both in Argentina and in other countries of the world, without ever going unnoticed. Because as Alabarces maintains, in addition to the hero, he is a character with strong political positions, and even though he could no longer continue playing, his sharp speech always places him in the center of the scene.

But Maradona did not bring joys for all *Lobo* supporters equally. Because the great popular Argentine idol, has a history as a man who has exercised gender violence against his partners and is known as an irresponsible father who has not recognized some of his children. For many Argentine women, Maradona represents the ideal of a *macho* and *misogynist* man that feminism aims to transform.

Diego returned to Argentine football in a context of enormous progress of the women's and feminist movement, which has been manifesting with a strong presence on the streets, with particular emphasis since 2015, when the first #NiUnaMenos took place, an enormous mobilization of women throughout the country that crystallizes on July 3, from the increase in femicides⁵. This movement, also pushed by the debates about the legalization of abortion in the national congress during 2018, gained a massiveness never seen before. On March 5th 2018, the National Campaign for Legal, Safe and Free Abortion presented by seventh time in the Chamber of Deputies the bill of Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy. Abortion has preliminary approval in the deputy chamber on June 14 of that year, but was rejected on August 9 in the Chamber of senators. Both days of debate and voting were accompanied by massive mobilizations in the streets, and women and feminist organizations spent all night in the street waiting for the voting.

One of the impacts of this movement since #NiUnaMenos implies the reconversion of feminist historical demands into public problems that acquired legitimacy, massiveness and transversality in other social sectors (Natalucci y Rey, 2018:28).

Some authors characterize this movement as "fourth wave of feminism" (Barrancos, 2018; Natalucci y Rey, 2019). They argue that the novelty is in its arrival to places previously unthinkable. The football world, which in Argentina was structured as a space "by men and for men" (Alvarez Litke, 2018; Hijós, 2018), began to be questioned

⁵ The phenomenon had a great visibility from the use of social networks and media, which contributed to the installation of demand on the public agenda, and the consequent occupation of the streets by women in all cities of the country.

massively by different sectors of feminism, which for many years had ignored it as an object of dispute, despite the fact women were always in football, as fans (Conde and Rodríguez, 2002) and as players (Elsey, 2019; Pujol, 2019), establishing a distance with the popular world⁶. Elsey (2019) suggests that the construction of football as an object of dispute is based on the work of grassroots activists such as physical education teachers Lorena Berdula and Mónica Santino, who have been working since twenty years ago for obtain women's right to play football, which implies for them a questioning of the patriarchal order that structures society.

In this context, Gimnasia, like many other Argentine clubs, created its *gender area* in 2018, an institutional space occupied by women identified as *feminists* that aims to end the *structural machismo* that characterizes the club. This space, driven by female fans, club members, and athletes, aims to conquer and transform the spaces in which football is managed. Maradona's arrival at the club, after a year and a half of intense activity in the *gender area* that positioned the club as a pioneer in gender issues, meant a breaking point for its members, a *problematic situation* (Ceffai, 2011) that evidenced not only the heterogeneity of positions around the gender problems that had grouped them in that space, but also the limits of their possibility of influencing club policy.

During the days before the official debut of the DT, *the girls*⁷ discussed how to take a stand in front of the arrival of *el diez*: if issuing a public statement repudiating Maradona, if carrying out individual actions, if they dialogue with the board of directors or if they accept his arrival, since the *triperero people*⁸ was extremely happy. Finally, they chose not

⁶ This has been indicated by the referent of the feminist *villero* football, Mónica Santino, who argues that the feminism dispute for access to popular culture is very recent, because the academic white feminism has paid no attention. However, despite this lack of interest in football the approach of feminism to the world of sport is not a historical novelty. Some studies have traced their links, showing an early relationship between them. Scharagrodsky (2014) and Anderson (2017) coincide in pointing out the importance of the First Congress of International Feminism that was held in Argentina in 1910 in which access to physical culture and sports already appeared as an object of dispute for feminists of the time. These initial approaches and the subsequent solitary struggle of a group of women who have been working to guarantee women's rights in sports, were the basis of the current massive movement of feminist women that all across the country seek to transform the sports world from a gender perspective.

⁷ In this text I'm going to refer to the members of the area as "the girls", a translation for a native concept that refers to young women. In Argentina, the concept "pibe" historically refers to young men, and even Archetti (2008) has shown the centrality that such a concept has occupied in the style and the football imaginary that defines the Argentine (always masculine). To call themselves "las pibas" may be understood as a resignification of a historically masculine concept.

⁸ Gimnasia supporters call themselves *tripereros* and *triperas*. Also, calling themselves *people* refers to the associated sense of the club identity as a humble supporters club. According to Godio (2009), in 1914 Estudiantes de La Plata Club expelled the players who did not reside in the urban area, who were

to issue a public statement, understanding that the only chance of being recognized as legitimate interlocutors of club leaders, members and supporters was not opposing the fact that had brought more joy to the fans in the last years. As Jeny, one of *the girls*, told me: "Despite the sadness that generates me that my club hires a violent man, I understand that it gives people joy, and I do not mess with the happiness of the people". Tracking the delicate process through which *the girls* managed to build such a consensus contributes to illuminate a more general question about the process of constitution of the Argentine women's movement, where its members experiences are enormously diverse.

This article is situated at the intersection between the field of sports social studies - particularly those that analysed the relationship between Argentine football clubs and politics - and studies on the contemporary women's movement and feminism. Its main objective is to describe and analyse the ways in which a group of feminist women organize themselves in Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata club and struggle for power, combining two political logics: those of the world of football and those of feminism. This combination involves constant negotiation and articulation, both within the space members and with the leaders, members and supporters of the club.

For the analysis, an ethnographic methodology was privileged, where in-depth interviews with the women who are part of the *gender area* of Gimnasia were combined with fieldwork in various significant instances for them: area meetings, women's football games, demonstrations against gender violence and events organized by both them and the club. It is important to mention that this article includes the data obtained during the field work carried out between June 2018 and February 2020.

2. Football clubs in Argentina: non-profit civil associations with hyper professional male football

To comprehend the importance of the political organization of feminist women in Gimnasia, it is necessary to mention some of the particularities that football clubs have in Argentina. Unlike what happens in other countries where football clubs are private companies, Argentine football clubs are non-profit civil associations. They were born in

incorporated by Gimnasia. They were inhabitants of the peripheral area of Berisso and workers of its refrigerating companies, and they were called "tripero" in a derogatory way, a term that is used to this day by Gimnasia supporters, but now with a positive value.

the last years of nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth by the impulse of their members who organized themselves to play football and other sports. The National State benefited them by donating land, granting subsidies and exempting them from paying taxes, with the expectation that they fulfill a social function. As Moreira and Daskal explain, this “beneficial compensation” (2017:19) implies, first, the generation of a common good for its members; and secondly a benefit that extends to the community in general that has to do with its social function.

The fact that Argentine clubs are non-profit civil associations, which are sustained by the income from the social contributions of their members, implies that in these entities the owners are the members. Some members organize themselves in clubs with political goals, and as Daskal and Moreira argue, “relationships are configured that are learned in an associationist way, relationships that also influence and are part of the (better) economic, social and cultural performance of the institutions and democratic societies” (2017: 20)

Like all Argentine clubs, Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata is a non-profit civil association. As it has professional male football, the hyper professionalization of football coexists with the logic of the civil association (Moreira, 2018), which is the prevailing logic since the foundation of the clubs⁹. On this matter, Gimnasia not only has professional male football, but also a multitude of amateur sports are practiced, in addition to having a kindergarten, primary and secondary school. Besides sports activities, different conferences and events are held by *the Subcommittee of Culture and Museum, the Social area* and other areas that make their sociocultural contribution voluntarily.

In Argentina, anyone can join a club by paying a relatively low monthly fee. Clubs are democratic and collegiate conducting bodies, with control organ, member assemblies and a statute that governs the associative life of the clubs. That statute defines the functions and objectives of the institution, and the obligations of its members and its board of directors. So, for example, Article 2 of the *statute of Gimnasia* (2000) sets that the purposes of the Society are:

⁹ It´s important to mention that in Argentina male football is professional since 1931, and women´s football since 2019.

- a) To instill and spread the feeling of nationality and common good, stimulate and promote physical, moral and intellectual education, through the practice of useful exercises to invigorate the body and ennoble the spirit;
- b) Have social locations and playing fields, suitable for practicing all kinds of sports, as long as there are strength, dexterity, or intelligence;
- c) Install reading rooms, meeting rooms and healthy entertainment, as well as any other comfort that benefits the members, promoting greater spiritual approach amongst them and contribute to the greater progress of the Club;
- d) Maintain cordial relationships with others Institutions in the country and abroad.

Unlike what happens in the European leagues and in other Latin American countries, Argentine leaders reach the executive committee of a club through the electoral mechanisms stipulated in their statutes. Every 2, 3 or 4 years (depending on the club's laws) members choose the people who will be their representatives. Political dispute is constitutive of Argentine clubs. In Gimnasia, the current Executive Committee was first elected in 2016 with the support of 53% of the members and since then it has been managing the club in an unfavourable economic context. And it was re-elected on December 14th 2019 after a conflictive process of alliances and disagreements between the different lists that were running for elections. Finally, Gabriel Pellegrino was re-elected with 61% of the votes.¹⁰ Days before the election, Maradona had publicly affirmed that he would only remain in the club if Pellegrino won, which finished defining the vote in Pellegrino's favour. As the historian Julio Frydenberg maintains, the logic of football competition is the dominant one and guides economic and political decisions (2010).

3. Women's political participation in Argentine football clubs

¹⁰ Out of 30000 members that Gimnasia has, 12139 were qualified to vote and 4586 did so. To be able to vote, members must be over 18 years old and have no debts in the monthly fee.

36 people conform Gimnasia's board of directors. Only two of them are women, and they are both substitute members. This low percentage of women participating in club management is not unique to Gimnasia, but is a common denominator in all cases of clubs with professional football teams, some of which do not have any women in their spaces of power, despite the fact that article 20bis of the Sports Law reformed in 2016 seemed to have addressed the issue of the female quota in the lists presented at the election of the Executive Committee. Article 20 bis of Law 20655 establishes a minimum for women and young people, including them in the same category, as can be seen in the aforementioned article: "The lists submitted for the election of the members of the Board of Directors in the first-degree sports civil associations of the Institutional System of Sport and Physical Activity, must have a minimum of TWENTY PERCENT (20%), as a whole, of women and young people between EIGHTEEN (18) and TWENTY-NINE (29) year". This law is not observed by any of the football clubs.

In total, of the football clubs that play the first division tournament, 6.07% of the leaders are women. Only one of them is president (Lucía Barbuto in Club Atlético Banfield), one is third vice president and the rest are records secretaries, substitute members, account reviewers, members of the conduct court or of the supervisory commission.

The literature has addressed the relationship between politics and sport in Argentine clubs, showing how politics is constitutive of such institutions. According to these studies, Argentine clubs are schools of democracy and civility: they are instances of the development of civic virtues, training in social and democratic life, and the deployment of rules that must be respected by the participants in the manner of a political system (Frydenberg, 1997; Frydenberg and Daskal 2010; Moreira and Daskal 2017). However, none of these works recognize that women's participation in this democratic system has historically been discouraged by many means. Not only because some institutions excluded women from being full members, denying them the chance of both voting and being elected as authorities, but also because the amateurism of the leaders of the Argentine clubs, who work without remuneration entails to a concentration of administrative positions for the benefit of those who have the necessary time to perform the functions for free. Women, whose access to leisure and free time has traditionally been limited, have been unable to access such positions.

Despite the fact that we found no studies on women's political participation in Argentine football clubs, Anderson shows that women organized themselves around sports and physical activity, which led them to find instruments through which to build and define a political agency decoupled from motherhood (2017, 6). Anderson argues that, at a time when women still did not have the right to vote, clubs allowed women to have political projects, even when the objective was to be able to get together to play and many of them have not lasted in time.

Driven by the advancement of the women's movement in Argentina, a multiplicity of public organizations and civil society organizations have been creating spaces dedicated to work on gender issues, such as quotas, violence and structural machismo of society. Football clubs have not been oblivious to this process. Since 2017, Argentine clubs created specific spaces to address gender issues: *gender areas* and departments, creation of action protocols against gender violence, women's secretariats or departments. In turn, female supporters and club members created feminist groups outside the institutions, but whose demands aim to have an impact on the institutional life of the clubs.

The formats and links of these spaces vary according to the club. Thus, not only did gender spaces proliferate in football clubs, but also the demand for the visibility of women's football and its professionalization found an answer in the AFA, whose president announced the semi-professionalization in March 2019, echoing the claims that player Maca Sánchez had been carrying on¹¹. The creation of *Gimnasia's Gender Area* accompanied a process that had been taking place in other clubs of football first division, which in some cases are framed within the institutional framework as gender sub-secretariats, in others as women's secretariats and in others as subcommittees.

4. *Triperas* and feminists: “doing something about gender” in *El Lobo*.

The *gender department* of Gimnasia was officially created in June 2018, after Luisina and Belén, two young journalism students presented a project to the Executive Committee. I approached them after reading an interview in a local paper.

¹¹ To deepen on the process of professionalization of women's football, I recommend the journalist Ayelén Pujol's articles published on Pagina 12. “La nueva era ya se vislumbra” on 04/17/2019 at <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/187051-la-nueva-era-ya-se-vislumbra> and “El fútbol también es de las pibas” publicada el 16/03/2019 en https://www.pagina12.com.ar/181431-el-futbol-tambien-es-de-las-pibas?fbclid=IwAR23MyOrHxr67ANbVteY2fCQ7Ib_OiAkZp7JBI0ddRMMntT7Do9AUGzRuUg

Since our first meeting I began to participate together with *the girls* of meetings, activities, conversations and events organization. Luisina and Belén promoted the creation of the space within the framework of the final work of their degree in Social Communication. Luisina is *passionate* about sports and had been a member of a feminist organization between 2013 and 2016. Belén was *always a fanatic, crazy about el Lobo*, but in recent years she had begun to distance herself from the stadium, a space that had become for her a redoubt of production and reproduction of sexist logics, of which she felt *complicit* if she did nothing to change it. Therefore, her first had been to change the lyrics of the songs she sang there: “Where it says *puto*¹², I change it for *gil*¹³,” or “balls for ovaries,” she told me. This strategy is not naive, if we take into account that the football songs have historically been constituted as a concrete way of exercising power, reaffirming the structural machismo of society, as Bundio (2016) shows. If women had been historically excluded from the cheering ritual, the desire and project to transform the songs into non-violent ones against women and sexual or gender nonconformity is a bet that, without being exempt from difficulties, is of particular interest to the women who inhabit these spaces.

The realization of the idea of “making a gender area in *El Lobo*” was possible by the contacts Belén had made during her *fan* years. She argues that she “knew some people in the club, for going, for being.” Mobilized by the historical moment that the feminist movement is going through in Argentina, they decided to move forward with that idea, articulating with the Culture and Museum Subcommittee of Gimnasia, an institutional link that allowed them to present the project to the members of the Executive Committee. Accompanied by gender agenda in the public debate, the project was quickly approved. In addition, there was a circumstance that, from their point of view, was key regarding to generate the space: a case of sexual abuses of minor male players in Club Atlético Independiente, another professional football club, that came to light in early 2018. Sensitized by “what had happened in Independiente” and after the concern of some parents of athletes who approached the club, the leaders of Gimnasia understood that it

¹² *Puto* is an insult that means homosexual. In Argentina it’s common to use the concept of *puto* as an offence, especially in the field of football, which is a homophobic space. As many studies have shown, the rivalry in Argentina football is crossed by the idea of masculinity: I am better because I am a man and my rival is a homosexual.

¹³ A *gil* is a person that is silly or shows naivety.

was necessary to start paying attention to this kind of issues. In this sense, they believed that promoting a *gender area* would provide tools to prevent issues like that from happening in the club.

We can mention, so far, that the emergence of the *gender area* has to do with a desire to “do something about gender” in the club by two feminist students who find a favourable response to their demands by male leaders who strategically understand that need the feminists to support their political project. However, "Doing something about gender" have different meaning for *the girls* and for the leaders. For *the girls*, it means to condemn and transform the patriarchal and macho structure of Argentine football. While the club leaders expected them to work only with children and young athletes to prevent sexual abuse and violence.

For Luisina and Belén, the main objective of "doing something about gender" is to promote the gender perspective in the club: between the board of directors, sports coaches, athletes, workers and supporters. The gender perspective means for them recognizing the inequality between the genders on which society is structured in all its areas, based on a sexual difference that tends to naturalize the domination of men over women and other gender identities.

To do this they made several activities: a public talk about women's football (as when Luisina told me that they had invited Monica Santino), workshops on gender perspective with the athletes and the inferior ones, trainings in gender perspective for coaches and the contact with groups or gender spaces of other institutions. They also track the history of prominent female athletes in the files of the club, and conduct awareness campaigns against gender-based violence. As they affirm, their struggle is about defining the daily violence, and conquer the right to feel safe in stadiums as public spaces, that have marginalised women for many years.

Recognizing the small number of women in decision-making places, they work to achieve their access. However, it is an open debate between them, because some of them think that people who occupy those places should be people with a gender perspective, regardless of whether they are men or women, while others believe it is more important that those places are occupied by women.

In recent months, the number of women who approached the space grew enormously, and currently they are around 30 and work for committees: some deal with the press side,

others talk with leaders, and are taking specific tasks depending on of the activity being carried out. Although it is a heterogeneous space most of the women are college students or professionals, who come from the social sciences (social communication, political science, history, law). The heterogeneity of trajectories that we can find among the members of the area is fundamental to understand the specificity of the space. If some of them want to eradicate the prevailing *machismo* in the club, others find there a place to channel their desire to do something for Gimnasia. In this sense, Sofia, who told me that she was always interested in politics, represented participation in club assemblies as hostile. She told me: "Because it was a macho place, par excellence. Because they were all men... once I went ... but no, no. What was I doing there? Alone...I had nothing to do". In this sense, when she heard about the *gender area* she decided to approach and she says: "I wanted to start getting involved. And it was in Gimnasia. And do something for women. Why can't I fit in there? I fight to be free. Why not?"

Thus, in the area, political militant trajectories are combined with subjective projects for belonging to a group, doing something for Gimnasia, or fighting for women's rights.

Indeed, such heterogeneity, with the contradictions that its members recognize, allow us to think about the way in which Natalucci and Rey (2018) characterize the women's movement in Argentina, which "did not imply the conformation of a homogeneous feminist identity, but rather a heterogeneous and polyphonic type, with a high performative capacity in the public agenda and in the repertoires of the mobilized sectors" (2019, p. 20).

Some of *the girls* are political activists. They are trained in feminist theory and debates and are very dedicated to activism in the club. The leaders of the group have participated in traditional political parties within a progressive political spectrum, some in leftist parties, others in organizations more linked to Peronism and Kirchnerism, particularly in their student branch. They are disappointed by the patriarchal structures of traditional parties. There are also women who do not participate in other political spaces, and only recently and hesitantly are assumed "feminists". They were seeking to find a group of women with whom to go to the stadium or do things for women.

For Luisina and Belén there is one experience in their lives that is key to their political training: to have participated in the National Women's Encounters¹⁴. According to them, that experience was transformational. They have a challenge in their activism in the club: they must learn to play the institutional political game with capital acquired in other places. In order to assert them in the club they have to articulate them with others. These women mobilize two action repertoires: the repertoire of feminism, based on the notions of horizontality and equality - equality in a double sense: as an absence of hierarchies, but also as a group of women who share an experience of subordination and oppression, as shown by Masson (2007) who has studied political organization in the National Women's encounters (ENM); and also, the repertoire of the football world, structured around *the logic of aguante* that promotes a conception of football rivalry in terms of enmity, and that is crossed by notions such as bravery, honour and manliness linked to physical confrontations (Alabarces, Garriga Zucal and Moreira, 2008). Football literature in Argentina has a long history in showing how this logic permeates the world of football as a whole: supporters, players, leaders and journalists. The violence that takes place around football is legitimate because of this culture, which implies that currently only the supporters of one of the teams that are playing a football game can attend the stadium.

5. Feminisms between rival clubs. Construction of sisterhood and capitalization of rivalry.

An unavoidable reference to think about the specificity of the gender space in Gimnasia, refers to the classic rivalry with Estudiantes de La Plata. As literature has shown, football identities are always constructed by alternating with an *other*. The peculiarity of the Argentine case is that these identities were structured on the rhetoric of *aguante*, a native category that denotes a system of honor and prestige (Alabarces, Garriga Zucal and Moreira, 2008) linked to violence and physical confrontations. The possession of *aguante* by the supporters configures a type of hegemonic masculinity, based on the tolerance to pain in physical confrontations in *exposing the body, having balls* and being male.

¹⁴ National women's encounters take place once every year, for the last 34 years in different cities across the country. They consist of workshops where women approach various topics, from a perspective that highlights horizontality and equality. In 2019 the 34 ENM (National women encounter) was in La Plata, and authorities estimate that over one million women participated.

Luisina and Belén question the macho dimension of the stadium songs and the violent dimension of football rivalries, but it does not imply for them to question the rivalry itself. It is interesting to think about how this rivalry is reproduced in relation to the gender policies that each institution is carrying out. A few days after the first meeting I attended the area, I read in the press about the gender secretariat in Estudiantes. When consulting Luisina on this issue, she presented some objections about how the rival club understands gender:

“I don't know if it's ok what they are doing. Because they talk about strengthening female leadership as one of the objectives. And I don't think that the gender issue has to do with a question of leadership, which is an individual issue. The gender issue is a structural inequality. And then they also made a publication in Twitter that they were pioneers in the city, due to the fact that they had female ball catchers... I don't know if you generate equality by putting two girls as ball girls.”

These types of actions are commented on in the meetings of the area, where these facts are told in an ironic way and between laughs, what they understand is a liberal feminism. However, beyond these criticisms, they recognize the importance that Estudiantes is also "doing something", and to approach them to do something together. Although Luisina assures that the distances with Estudiantes have to do with ways of thinking gender policies, and that in the future the idea is to work together, other members such as Sofia will mention the difficulty of establishing a relationship of sisterhood with Estudiantes, explaining it in purely emotional terms:

“Because it seems to me that I am betraying the club. I feel something inside that tells me: I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it. The other day I took a picture with them. And a friend sees it, and tells me: I wouldn't have taken that picture. And I wanted to cry. Things like that, that generate controversies in me.”

The different conceptions about feminism present in the space of the area, and the links that from the area are established with other clubs, and in particular with its classic rival, can be thought in relation to what Masson (2007) shows in her studies on the women's movement, which has been structured by articulating an idea of equality on practices that include conflict as a constitutive dimension of feminist politics.

Football rivalries are processed for these women under the idea of *sisterhood*, which implies sharing common experiences of oppression and inequality. Building this

sisterhood in rivalry has nothing natural, and it is in the small details of their daily actions that the identity of feminisms in football is taking place: for example, the flyer that invites an activity can never have the color of opposing team.

Among the activities that were carried out between the gender areas of different clubs, a novelty occurred at the 34 ENM that took place in the city of La Plata in 2019, where the women of these spaces came together in two workshops: "Women and sports institutions" and "Women and football", in which for two days supporters, women that works in clubs, football players, sports journalist, academics and athletes from all over the country shared their experiences in the clubs and thought about joint action strategies for the future. It is worth mentioning here that, for the ENM, the political management of *the girls* in the area succeeded in getting Gimnasia to lend its facilities to house free of charge women from all over the country who came to the city to participate in the meeting. They organized from a few months before to take care of the security, the diffusion and the meals of those who would be staying at the club. For this they carried out "feminist meetings" in which they called on all the fans and members to collaborate and think out guidelines for action.

Now, if in order to conquer sisterhood without losing rivalry, a subtle work of articulating the differences between the fans and members of different clubs is required, it is that same rivalry that allows them, in front of other actors such as the leaders of the Club, obtain things. One of the strategies that *the girls* use when obtaining permission or endorsement by the club's Executive Committee to carry out some activity is to show what other clubs (particularly, but not only, Estudiantes) have been doing in gender issues. The possibility of "being pioneers in" (having a *gender area*, putting women ball catchers, or having a woman as the voice of the stadium) is something that none of the leaders want to miss, and if Estudiantes does any activity for the Woman International Day, the one who performs Gimnasia must be even bigger. In short, it is possible to think that by capitalizing football rivalries (using them in their favor), women in the area manage to do things: get the attention of the leaders and get their endorsement is essential for a political strategy whose purpose is not to get votes, but to gain space and legitimacy to raise awareness about gender inequality.

6. Achievements and setbacks: from Tifner to Maradona

“Two days I invite them to be an activist in a football club. Two days. Let's see how long they last”, Luisina told me, really distressed, after being criticized by feminist intellectuals, that told her that feminism should not negotiate or reconcile. This questioning was made in relation to the arrival of Maradona, when every feminist organization were expecting a public statement from the gender department condemning the idol. However, after long discussions they decided not to issue a statement, because they understood that any political project that included them in the club meant not facing against the popular feeling of the *triperos* and *triperas*, who were really happy to have Diego on their team. Luisina's phrase speaks of the meeting of these two worlds. *The girls* understood that, to survive politically in a football club, you have to reconcile, to settle. If the owners of politics in the Argentine clubs were always the liberal professionals, the businessmen and the *barras*¹⁵, women who now begin to dispute power use their political capitals acquired in the spaces of feminism, along with their academic credentials, to negotiate with actors that have other codes. Moreira (2010) has shown the deep interrelation between the world of football and politics, where for the male leaders, the capitals that allow them to dispute power in the clubs have to do with trajectories inside the club, accredit blood ties with founders of the institution, but also have money to finance campaigns, contacts and free time. For women, on the other hand, it is prior political learning and the tools provided by college careers that allow them, for example, to speak in public, expose a problem or demand, or talk in the media.

In this sense, it is interesting to think about the way in which both Belén and Luisina relied on my analysis many times "as a sociologist" to help them think of strategies and possibilities for action.

Among the area achievements, Luisina stands out as the "first great victory" having influenced the decision of the Executive Committee not to call a player with complaints of "gender-based violence". On February 1, 2019 Pedro Troglio, Gimnasia's coach, separated Hernán Tifner, a player who had starred in a viral video in which he was seen scratching the car of his girlfriend, who denounced him for gender-based violence. In this

¹⁵The *barras* are de organized supporters that apply physical violence in order to defend the honor of their club. They are always males, and as literature have shown, they have colluding whit the club's leaders, the local governments and the police. They have *aguante*, and they use it as *bargaining chips*.

sense, Luisina recounts the role of the *gender area* in such a decision as fundamental, as they insisted that the player should be separated from the team. She told me:

“It was very important for us, because we worked together all the time, there was dialogue between the Committee, the press department, marketing department and us. It's like our space was consolidated, where if we hadn't been there, I'm sure the situation wouldn't have been resolved the way it was. So it was like a great first big victory within the club, and within football in general, we were the first club to do something like that”.

Half a year later, the first women's football match in the professional era took place, in which Gimnasia faced Huracán at the *forest* stadium. While we waited for the match to begin, *the girls* in the area hung a flag behind the arch that said "Legal, safe and free abortion." Entering it to the stadium had not been easy. In Argentina, security policies in stadiums prohibit the entry of flags with political slogans, and the claim for legal abortion is one of them. *The girls* believed that because they were part of the *area* they could be inspected in more detail than their male counterparts. They chose to ask some colleagues from one of the *Lobo*'s subsidiaries to enter the flag. The game took place a few days after Maradona's arrival at the club, so the “Maradona theme” set the agenda for the conversations. Jeny told me laughing that she had been about to separate from her boyfriend, who was ecstatic with happiness with Diego's arrival at the club. She wanted to convince him about the reasons why, for the feminist women of Gimnasia, the arrival of the idol did not mean good news, but a severe setback in the gender policies that they had been carrying out from the area. Her effort was in vain, since for the vast majority of the *Tripero* people the arrival of Diego caused immeasurable joy.

"And with *people*'s happiness I do not mess" said Jeny resigned, in a phrase that condenses the complexity of the labor that feminisms in the clubs have been carrying out. Reaching such a consensus had political consequences for *the girls* in the area. After a year and a half of intense work, during which they managed to be a point of reference inside and outside the club, being consulted by many women from different clubs in the country who were seeking advice to create similar spaces, accept Maradona's arrival implied within the area the emergence of conflicts that had been processed and resolved under the ideas of equality, horizontality and sisterhood. However, they began to discuss around whether it was better to maintain a horizontal policy or establish hierarchies in order to negotiate with powerful interlocutors; if it was more desirable to transform the

club from the inside, or to press from outside without being accountable to anyone. At the same time, tensions were becoming evident between those who recognized themselves as "first feminists and then *triperas*" or those who identified themselves as "more *triperas* than feminists." And if they had managed to define themselves as a political space but not allied to any political party, some decisions such as with which political column they should demonstrate in the National Women Encounter, appeared as problematic for some of them¹⁶.

In this way, two big positions were generated, and the intensity that Maradona's arrival implied for *the girls* led towards the end of 2019 to the distancing of Luisina, Sofia and other women, which however, moved to other spaces within the club. Luisina advanced with a project to create an "Observatory on women in the club", from which to trace the history of female members, athletes and workers of the *Lobo*. The other girls approached other institutional spaces, such as the Culture and Museum Committee and the women's football subcommittee.

To finish this section, it is necessary to promote a reflective look on the relationship that I established with my interlocutors, with whom I built a relationship of trust and affection, in addition to the fact that they made me part of their network of relationships and strategic contacts with whom they work. Tracking politics in the club from an ethnographic perspective (Ferraudi Curto, 2010; Hang, 2018), implies being attentive to the way in which politics was also made with me inside. Every time they asked my opinion on an issue, I insisted on the importance of them staying together, occupying that space that had historically been denied to women and that had cost so much to achieve. The dialogue with my interlocutors was constant, and they found in my opinions and readings tools to think about their political activity. Anthropologist Verena Stolcke (1996) argues that feminist anthropology from the beginning understood research as an essential tool for social emancipation. In this sense, my immersion in the field went together with the

¹⁶ The ENM ends with a demonstration that crosses thorough the City. The demonstration that closed the 34th ENM in the city of La Plata was the most massive in the history of the ENM, in which it is estimated that more than 300 thousand women participated. For the first time, it featured a column headed by the Coordinadora de Fútbol Feminista, in which women and dissidents linked to soccer converged. However, in a year of national elections and a few days after them, the women of the Gimnasia's gender area decided to walk in the column of Frente de Todxs, the electoral front that promoted Alberto Fernández's candidacy for president of the nation.

pleasure that their work to eradicate machismo generated in me. That's why my sadness was big when Luisina told me that she was moving away from the *gender area*. Luisina and Belén insisted that it was not a problem, that they were going to continue working for the club. It seems important to me then to return to the way in which Masson (2007) characterizes Argentine feminism as a movement necessarily crossed by conflict as a form of relationship and not as an unresolved problem within feminist militancy. Masson affirms that depersonalizing conflict is a strategy that allows feminists to manage conflict at the political level. That is why Luisina insisted that the problem was political, about different ways of understanding political action in the club.

7. Final considerations

The approach of feminism to football occurs in a massive way in Argentina since #NiUnaMenos, promoting the creation of *gender spaces* in clubs throughout the country that aim to promote policies from a gender perspective, which makes visible and breaks the inequality and the subordination of women, and that allows to rethink masculinities, gender stereotypes and establish anti-patriarchal ways of relating that promote football outside of the misogyny and machismo that historically characterized Argentine football. This article sought to understand the specific ways in which a group of feminist women organize politically in Gimnasia La Plata and dispute power with the aim of eradicating the machismo and misogyny of the club, combining two political logics: one from the world of football and another from feminism. This combination involves a negotiation and a constant articulation both within the space between heterogeneous positions and with the leaders and members of the club. Achieving a balance between these two logics is not a simple task for *the girls*, who learn to mobilize the different repertoires of action adapting to the *problematic situations* around which the group is defined. Maradona's arrival at the club was one of the key situations around which political definitions and strategies were put into play, which prompted them to rethink their capacity for action, their interlocutors, their networks and their future agenda. It promoted a process of rearrangement of the protagonists, where some were inside and others outside, activating new spaces from which to work on the gender perspective, the central objective of the feminist women that *militate* the club.

The case of Gimnasia's *gender area* allows us to illuminate some characteristics of a broader social movement that refers to the Argentine women's movement since

#NiUnaMenos. A heterogeneity of women, with diverse trajectories and with diverse political projects that converge in a traditionally masculine place, and that intend to eradicate structural machismo by introducing gender perspective and taking advantage of the political context of the advancement of women's rights.

Women who created the *gender area* of the Gimnasia identify themselves around the category of "feminists *triperas*", which, far from presenting itself as a homogeneous identity without conflict, fluctuates between those who they define as "before feminists, *triperas*", or "more feminists than *triperas*". In this process of identification, they build some "others": sometimes the feminisms of other clubs, sometimes the leaders of Gimnasia. In this exchange, they establish alliances and negotiations.

Finally, and considering the analysis of the links that are established with other clubs from the area, it is possible to introduce a question about the way in which a women's conscience is articulated within the framework of a football club, but also between clubs. Continuing to investigate in this line will allow us to deepen the specific ways in which collective action is composed of conflict and difference as central elements that are processed, in this case, under the concepts of sisterhood and equality.

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