

# Sport Kuetuvy: More than Soccer, an Identity that Challenges Inequality



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*Margarita learned to sing with her grandparents in the forest. When she was just 4 years old, she was kidnapped and sold as a domestic servant, a criada. She survived the Aché genocide<sup>1</sup> and criadazgo<sup>2</sup> and today she provides support in her community to girls and adolescents who seek to transform inequality conditions playing soccer.*

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1 During Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship, the Aché people were captured in the forest to be later sold into slavery. [https://www.iwgia.org/images/publications/0295\\_ache.pdf](https://www.iwgia.org/images/publications/0295_ache.pdf)

2 *Criadazgo* is a common practice in Paraguay that refers to a form of child labour, where children are given to people of better economic standing to perform domestic tasks. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-36544713>



It's Saturday morning and the sun is shining brightly. We walk a few metres past the sign indicating the entrance to “Kuetu-vy” and there we see her, unmistakable, with her long, plaited black hair, surrounded by girls wearing colourful sportswear.

This indigenous leader, who spent her childhood and adolescence under the guise of *criadazgo*, a naturalised form of child labour in Paraguay, was sold several times to different households until she managed to escape. She was 20 years old when she was reunited with her family. Later, she would become the first female chief of her community and the first indigenous Minister in Paraguay<sup>3</sup>. “I remembered the songs of my ancestors; I always knew I had to return,” she says.

The Kuetuivy community is located in the Canindeyú department, almost 300 kilometres from the capital city, Asunción.

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<sup>3</sup> Fernando Lugo's government was the first electoral defeat of the Partido Colorado in Paraguayan history. During this period, Margarita was appointed Director of the Institute of Indigenous Affairs. Her tenure supported the historic demands of indigenous peoples, such as the recovery of ancestral lands, access to healthcare, education and drinking water, as well as forest conservation.



There, in the last remnants of the Alto Paraná Atlantic Forest, live approximately 80 families of the Aché Guayakí people. They have a 4,760-hectare reserve where they grow their own food, cultivate yerba mate under the bushes and share a passion for soccer.

In 2014 they officially founded the “Sport Kuetuvy” club, whose current president is Margarita. The club is affiliated with the Yvypytãense Sports League, which in turn is affiliated with the Football Federation of the Fourteenth Department of Canindeyú and the Football Union of the Interior (UFI) in Paraguay. The soccer field is located in the centre of the community, surrounded by leafy mango trees that offer generous shade to spectators. It is the meeting point par excellence for the entire community, especially for girls and boys, whose main pastime is chasing a soccer ball, even during the hot Paraguayan summer afternoons.



## The Girls' Game

The girls remember learning to play soccer with their mothers. The small field was made of mud; the goal posts were made of fallen branches; and the ball was made of rags. None of this mattered. Their only concern was getting their teams together to be able to start the game.

Back then, they were a small group. Today, around 30 girls attend training. “They pay attention and they are disciplined,” the coach emphasises. Soccer is about fighting for and occupying space. The Aché girls understand this on the field and in life. They are true to this concept. In this way, in 2018, they set out to win the first national title for their beloved Sport Kuetuvy and ended up being crowned Paraguayan women’s soccer champions in the Under-16 category of the Paraguayan Football Association’s (APF) Development League. In 2022, they represented the country in a South American tournament organised by CONMEBOL.



“It was a real achievement for our community. In the semi-finals, we played against Olimpia, a team from the capital with a large budget. Our team didn’t even have enough money to complete its kit,” Margarita notes.

Liliana, captain of that championship-winning team, now plays for Cerro Porteño, one of the most important clubs in Paraguay. With this team, she lifted the first Paraguay Cup in women’s soccer in 2024, scoring a goal in the penalty shootout.

“Soccer stirs emotion, passion and, in most cases, lifelong happiness with the team you support,” says Liliana, who tells us that her community’s support was key to her being able to fulfil her dream of playing for a professional team. She now aspires to make the Paraguayan national team and compete in a World Cup.

Her mother, Gladys, cannot hide her pride when telling us about her daughter: “She’s living something that was a dream for us, because she never stopped trying. Since she

was little, she's told me that this is what she wanted." She adds that she has also played soccer since she was a little girl and that she participated in several local and regional tournaments, carrying her daughter in her arms.



For Ricardo, one of the three community leaders, sports help keep youth away from addiction, a problem that threatens the community today due to a lack of economic resources and opportunities. That is why they make a constant collective effort to cover the club's expenses and sustain it. Now they hope to build a gym for the entire community to use.

The whistle blows and the game begins. The girls give their all to every move. They tackle with determination, maintain possession, move forward. They proudly wear their team jersey. They know they are part of a story that questions and challenges inequality. They rise to the occasion.

Margarita follows them with her eyes and smiles. When they have the ball at their feet, they feel free. And right alongside them, the girl who for years sought to return to her origins to rebuild her identity is also free.

