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## The #MeToo movement's manifestation in Croatia: engaging with the meaningfulness of transnational feminist solidarity

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# The #MeToo movement's manifestation in Croatia: engaging with the meaningfulness of transnational feminist solidarity

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the transnational #MeToo movement's manifestation in Croatia alongside the divided public responses to the ratification of the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The article argues that motherhood discourse was a unifying factor in mobilising activism seeking to address violence against women. Utilising motherhood politics may be an effective tool for attracting widespread support in nationalist and conservative settings, but it also reinforces particular constructions of femininity consequently leading to silences and exclusions. While considering the potentials and risks of the Croatian #MeToo campaigns and how these relate to broader discussions on transnational feminism, the article calls for further reflection on what meaningful transnational feminist solidarity entails.

**KEYWORDS** #MeToo; feminist theory; violence against women; anti-gender movements; transnational feminist solidarity

## 1. Introduction

It was two years after the #MeToo hashtag went viral on social media that Jelena Veljača, actress, screenwriter and activist who initiated the Croatian #Spasime (#SaveMe) campaign, appeared as a guest on the widely viewed Croatian talk show 'Nedjeljom u 2' (Sunday at 2).<sup>1</sup> This particular episode aired soon after the #Pravdazadjevojke (#JusticeforGirls) protests that took place throughout the country in response to the Zadar County Court releasing five young men accused of gang raping, harassing and blackmailing

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<sup>1</sup> All websites accessed 30 March 2022. The interview with Veljača drew a lot of public attention because of the fierce debate that took place on air between Stanković and Veljača on the topic of sexual violence and the difference between sexual harassment and flirtation. However, its significance for the purposes of this article lies in what it reveals about feminist solidarity within the Croatian #MeToo context and for this reason I do not address the controversial debate.

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a 15-year-old girl in the area of Zadar.<sup>2</sup> Aleksandar Stanković, host of the show, invited Veljača to talk about the transnational #MeToo movement and her involvement in fighting for women's rights and the protection of victims of sexual violence in Croatia. At some point during the interview, Stanković raised a question submitted by a member of the public regarding her refusal to support a protest organised by a local Zadar woman who was one of the first people to respond to the Zadar County Court's shocking decision. Veljača said:

I do not perceive it as refusal [...] There was a protest in front of the Court, the woman in question declares herself as a Catholic feminist and I think there was an ideological problem because this woman was very vocal against the Istanbul Convention at the time of its ratification, and all the organisations that we work with are strong supporters of the Istanbul Convention.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident from Veljača's response that ideological differences matter in the fight against violence against women in Croatia, especially following the ratification of the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (hereinafter Istanbul Convention). Though the actress and feminist activist stated that she had nothing against Catholic feminist activists and emphasised how important it was for all voices to be heard regardless of their ideological messages, she concluded: 'but we do not all have to be sitting at the same table'.<sup>4</sup>

Veljača's response raises questions about the limits of feminist solidarity, especially when it comes to solidarity with Catholic feminists, and can be used to investigate the limits of transnational feminist solidarity more broadly. Should we engage with and support only those feminists with whom we agree with? How do we engage productively with difference, especially difference that is based on views on gender? What are the risks of extending feminist solidarity in contexts where political and public discourse question the validity of *gender* as a concept? Most importantly, how do we exercise meaningful transnational feminist solidarity? In order to engage with the meaningfulness of transnational feminist solidarity, this article looks at the Croatian adaptation of the transnational #MeToo movement and examines how the discourse of motherhood became a unifying factor in mobilising activism seeking to address violence against women.

After setting out what a transnational feminist approach entails and why transnational feminism should engage with postsocialist spaces, the article examines the ways in which the transnational feminist movement #MeToo manifested in Croatia. It identifies three hashtag campaigns,

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<sup>2</sup> Maya Oppenheim, 'Release of Teen Gang Rape Suspects in Croatia Sparks Backlash' *The Independent* (19 October 2019), online: <[www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/croatia-gang-rape-teenager-suspects-police-release-kadar-a9162246.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/croatia-gang-rape-teenager-suspects-police-release-kadar-a9162246.html)>.

<sup>3</sup> *Nedjeljom u 2 - Jelena Veljača* (2019), online: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HjZ6dgRBP4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HjZ6dgRBP4)>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

*#Prekinimosutnju* (*#EndtheSilence*), *#Spasime* and *#Pravdazadjevojci*, and traces their origins and coverage by the local media, demonstrating how each campaign utilised motherhood discourse to focus attention on the protection of women and children.

In the third part, the article moves on to consider the effects of the ‘anti-gender movement’,<sup>5</sup> particularly the ways in which it had manifested in Croatia. It tries to make sense of the widespread visibility and support the local movement received in response to its opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Therefore, it considers the complexities arising from the similarities between the movement’s strategies and the impact of feminist digital awareness raising campaigns. While reflecting on the challenges that the anti-gender movement poses to transforming social and cultural ideas of gender relations, the fourth part considers the potential of a motherhood narrative for the protection of women and children against violence in a postsocialist, post-war and predominately Catholic state like Croatia. By taking into account the historical, political and cultural context, it also considers how the motherhood narrative may be susceptible to co-option by conservative and nationalist forces.

Agreeing with voices that identify *#MeToo* and its local manifestations as transnational feminist solidarity movements, the article concludes by considering the potentials, as well as the risks, that the Croatian manifestation of *#MeToo* uncovers. Furthermore, it relates these considerations to broader discussions on transnational feminist solidarity by setting out the problem of selectivity and calling for further reflection on what a meaningful transnational feminist solidarity entails.

## 2. A transnational feminist approach

Transnational feminism, broadly understood, encompasses a field of scholarship and activism that advances a critical comparative approach to feminist knowledge production, organising and solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Unlike international feminism, which is focused on the nation-state and based on the idea of feminist cooperation across nation-state borders, a transnational approach looks at the uneven ways in which power and resistances have unfolded around the world. It does this by opening up space for cross-border perspectives

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<sup>5</sup> The notion ‘anti-gender movement’ is used here to refer to campaigns that are part of a transnational movement targeting so-called gender ideology. ‘Gender ideology’ is a derogatory term used to oppose gender mainstreaming and women’s and LGBT+ rights activism. It is also used to oppose scholarship that deconstructs essentialist assumptions about gender and sexuality. See David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, ‘“Gender Ideology” in Movement: Introduction’ in Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) 1–22.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Mapping Transnational Feminist Engagements’ in Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

on the diverse experiences of women as a result of different historical, political and cultural contexts thus leading to cross-border solidarity.<sup>7</sup> As Indrepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have argued in their seminal book *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, investigating women and gender processes around the world from a contextualised and historicised perspective ensures that generalised conclusions are not made about women's experiences of discrimination or violence.<sup>8</sup> It also ensures that more attention is given to the possibility that feminism 'may look very different depending on where, when and by whom it is enacted'.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it requires paying attention to the 'scattered hegemonies', such as 'global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, "authentic" forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels', which inform the nature and strategies of feminist struggles.<sup>10</sup>

Women's movements and the strategies they use to challenge different structures of power have been a central theme in transnational feminism. This focus was partly due to the onset of globalisation which, on the one hand, led to the expansion of neoliberal economic policies and, on the other, triggered transnational activism as a response to and in rejection of neoliberalism. As Moghadam points out, 'transnational feminist activism is one of the distinguishing features of globalisation-from-below'.<sup>11</sup> In their article that maps transnational feminist engagements, Carty and Mohanty highlight how even though women's organising can be diverse as a result of different historical, geopolitical, and contextual differences, the same movements demonstrate a connectedness in the way they challenge the neoliberal state and confront injustice.<sup>12</sup> They point out that these movements differ considerably from those 'anchored in liberal understandings of equal rights [which] have made inroads into and are perhaps more acceptable to the neoliberal state'.<sup>13</sup> Taking a transnational feminist approach requires recognising just how intertwined rights claims are with the dominant sexual, gender and cultural norms of a local context, but also the way

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<sup>7</sup> M Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Cartographies of Knowledge and Power: Transnational Feminism as Radical Praxis' in A Swarr and R Nagar (eds), *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (SUNY Press, 2010); Indrepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Grewal and Kaplan (n 7).

<sup>9</sup> Bice Maiguashca, 'Transnational Feminist Politics: A Concept That Has Outlived Its Usefulness?' in Jill Steans and Daniela Tepe (eds), *Handbook on Gender in World Politics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016) 116; See also Carole McCann, Seung-Kyung Kim and Emek Ergun (eds), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (Taylor & Francis, 5th edn 2021) 4.

<sup>10</sup> Grewal and Kaplan (n 7) 18.

<sup>11</sup> Valentine M Moghadam, 'Transnational Feminist Activism and Movement Building' in Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements* (OUP, 2015) 54.

<sup>12</sup> Carty and Mohanty (n 6).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

they are embedded within the practices of imperialism and colonialism as well as neoliberalism, conservatism and nationalism.<sup>14</sup>

While transnational feminism has generated powerful critiques of the effects of a globalising market, it has also been continuously subjected to self-examinations that assess how it may be ‘operat[ing] hegemonically from the same imperialist networks [it] seeks to critique’.<sup>15</sup> One such critique has called for a ‘renewed sensitivity to geographic contexts’ in order to increase understanding of the various transnational feminisms and ‘their connection to place and the kinds of difference this produces’.<sup>16</sup> As Conway points out, it is important to go beyond the ‘transnational feminism’ and ‘global sisterhood’ debate when analysing activist practices in order to properly consider the complex transnational feminist field.<sup>17</sup> One way to broaden the transnational feminist approach and look beyond Western/Northern feminist models of thinking and organising is to engage with specific transnational historical and cultural spaces, such as the postsocialist space.

In 2019, as part of a special issue of the *Feminist Review* on transnational feminist research, it was highlighted how perspectives from the postsocialist space are less prominent in transnational feminist scholarship.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly, scholars and activists from and working on postsocialist spaces are taking steps to ‘decolonise Anglo(phone) privilege’,<sup>19</sup> particularly in the ways knowledge is produced and how gender, sex and sexuality are theorised.<sup>20</sup> However, as pointed out by Hundle, Szeman and Pares Hoare, this is quite challenging, as postsocialist feminist scholars and activists operate in ‘hostile environments where political and public rhetoric questions the very validity of “gender” as a concept’.<sup>21</sup> For example, in 2018 Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban signed a government decree to remove gender studies from a list of approved master programmes.<sup>22</sup> Similar actions

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<sup>14</sup> Anna Elomäki and Johanna Kantola, ‘Theorizing Feminist Struggles in the Triangle of Neoliberalism, Conservatism, and Nationalism’ (2018) 25 *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 337, 337.

<sup>15</sup> Anneeth Kaur Hundle, Ioana Szeman and Joanna Pares Hoare, ‘What Is the Transnational in Transnational Feminist Research?’ (2019) 121 *Feminist Review* 3, 121.

<sup>16</sup> Janet M Conway, ‘Troubling Transnational Feminism(s): Theorising Activist Praxis’ (2017) 18 *Feminist Theory* 222.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Madina Tlostanova, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Redi Koobak, ‘The Postsocialist “Missing Other” of Transnational Feminism?’ (2019) 121 *Feminist Review* 81.

<sup>19</sup> Hundle, Szeman and Hoare (n 15) 7.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Suchland, *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex Trafficking* (Duke University Press, 2015); Teresa Kulawik, ‘Introduction: European Borderlands and Topographies of Transnational Feminism’ in Teresa Kulawik and Zhanna Kravchenko (eds), *Borderlands in European Gender Studies: Beyond the East-West Frontier* (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Hundle, Szeman and Hoare (n 15) 7.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Redden, Inside Higher Ed, ‘Hungary Officially Ends Gender Studies Programs’ (17 October 2018), online: <[www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/10/17/hungary-officially-ends-gender-studies-programs](http://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/10/17/hungary-officially-ends-gender-studies-programs)>.

were observed in Croatia the same year, when the Faculty of Croatian Studies removed the module ‘Sex, Gender and Human Rights’ taught by a prominent Croatian feminist scholar from its programme of studies.<sup>23</sup> Though these environments continue to present resistance to feminist knowledge about the social and legal, they have also informed the nature and strategy of local feminist activism. As this article illustrates, in environments where *gender* is challenged by conservative forces feminist organising requires a more strategic approach. For this reason, this paper suggests that paying attention to feminist organising in ‘hostile environments’ of postsocialist spaces provides an opportunity to further engage with ideas of transnational feminism.

In the next part, the paper examines the manifestation of #MeToo in Croatia. By identifying three local hashtag campaigns and tracing their origins and coverage by local media, feminist action is contextualised and relevant legislative developments that arose in response to the campaigns are traced. The extent to which strong cultural notions of motherhood were mobilised is considered to bring attention to the protection of women and children.

### 3. Croatia’s #MeToo moments: #Prekinimosutnju, #Spasime, #Pravdazadjevojke

Originally used by Tarana Burke in 2006 as part of a grassroots campaign to symbolise ‘empowerment through empathy’,<sup>24</sup> it was in October 2017 that the two words ‘Me Too’ went viral on social media. American actress Alyssa Milano published a tweet that read: ‘If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write “me too” as a reply to this tweet’.<sup>25</sup> Within two days, over one million Twitter users responded to and engaged with Milano’s tweet using the #MeToo hashtag. Initially, it was a response to a context of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace, but it quickly broadened in scope, demonstrating just how widespread sexual harassment and violence are in the world. Celebrated for its global reach, ‘one of the most encouraging features of the #MeToo movement has been the “contagious” nature of courage’.<sup>26</sup> It was like an energy that crossed borders, transgressed language divides and *moved* women to speak out. As these two words, ‘me too’, spread

<sup>23</sup> Dora Kršul, ‘Čini se da na Hrvatskim studijima više nema mjesta ni za Ivanu Radačić: Nedavno zasjela na čelo UN-ove skupine pa ispala iz nastave HS-a’ *Srednja.hr* (18 July 2018), online: <[www.srednja.hr/faks/cini-se-da-hrvatskim-studijima-vise-nema-mjesta-ni-ivanu-radacic-nedavno-zasjela-celo-un-ove-skupine-pa-ispala-iz-nastave-hs-a/](http://www.srednja.hr/faks/cini-se-da-hrvatskim-studijima-vise-nema-mjesta-ni-ivanu-radacic-nedavno-zasjela-celo-un-ove-skupine-pa-ispala-iz-nastave-hs-a/)>.

<sup>24</sup> See online: [metoomvmt.org](http://metoomvmt.org).

<sup>25</sup> Alyssa Milano, ‘If You’ve Been Sexually Harassed or Assaulted Write “Me Too” as a Reply to This Tweet. QT’ Twitter (15 October 2017), online: <<https://bit.ly/3uD5WEI>>.

<sup>26</sup> Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (Routledge, 2020) 11.

throughout the world bringing millions of stories to light, the power of the movement's message also grew and went beyond consciousness-raising. For example, in Argentina feminist activists used the momentum of the global movement to further their goal of legalising abortion, which was pushed for earlier under the #NiUnaMenos (Not One Woman Less) campaign.<sup>27</sup>

Though it is easy to assume that #MeToo was a highly successful feminist movement due to the immediate consequences that followed for perpetrators, it is important to take a critical approach when considering its impact. In their edited book titled *#MeToo and the Politics of Change*, Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes have called for a more nuanced examination of the movement when assessing its potentials and limitations. They suggest examining the movement 'within a broader context across multiple histories and trajectories of anti-sexual violence activism and justice efforts'.<sup>28</sup> They also call for greater reflection on whose voice was being heard and who had the privilege to speak out, pointing to broader issues of gender, race and sexuality.<sup>29</sup> These critical insights are significant when considering the successes and limitations of #MeToo, particularly within the Anglophone context. However, to fully engage with the legacy of #MeToo, a transnational feminist approach is required.

Questioning whether the #MeToo movement is just another product of neoliberal feminism, Ghadery points to its clear transnational feminist attributes: it provides a platform for victims to join and share their diverse experiences; aims to raise consciousness by drawing attention to the widespread issue of sexual violence and harassment as a result of structural inequalities existing around the world; and has led to powerful institutions and individuals reconsidering how they have been dealing with instances of sexual abuse.<sup>30</sup> As a transnational feminist movement, #MeToo does not silence the diversity of experience with a universalising narrative. Instead, through the participation of different communities, it presents a "multinational and multilocational approach" to the issue of sexual violence'.<sup>31</sup> Local communities around the world joined the transnational feminist solidarity movement by adapting the hashtag to reflect their own experiences with sexual abuse and violence, while directing attention in their own contexts to their

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<sup>27</sup> Maria Cecilia Garibotti and Cecilia Marcela Hopp, 'Substitution Activism: The Impact of #MeToo in Argentina' in Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (eds), *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change* (Springer Nature, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes, 'Introduction: Mapping the Emergence of #MeToo' in Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (eds), *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change* (Springer Nature, 2019) 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Farnush Ghadery, '#MeToo - Has the "Sisterhood" Finally Become Global or Just Another Product of Neoliberal Feminism?' (2019) 10 *Transnational Legal Theory* 252.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

specific circumstances. By examining the #MeToo movement as a transnational feminist movement it is possible to focus on its successes and limitations from a more contextualised perspective that brings to light experiences and knowledge from different localities, particularly those outside the Anglophone context.

One important contribution on how the #MeToo movement has manifested in different localities is an interdisciplinary handbook edited by Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir.<sup>32</sup> Significant to this scholarly contribution are the local perspectives illustrating how #MeToo relates to the many feminist struggles already in place, as well as the solidarity it builds with similar movements. For example, the contribution on the #MeToo movement in Poland, a postsocialist context similar to Croatia in terms of religion, explains how the local campaign helped to mainstream the issue of sexual violence against women in the country even though it did not lead to any progress in legal proceedings against rape or sexual violence perpetrators.<sup>33</sup> The chapter on Russia shows how the local movement was initiated prior to the #MeToo movement emerging in the US and has since drawn a lot of public attention to issues relating to discrimination and violence that are generally ignored by the Russian government.<sup>34</sup> Both contributions provide insight into how the postsocialist context shapes the struggles against violence against women and this article adds to these contributions by showing the potentials and risks of feminist solidarity in conservative contexts.

Almost a year after the #MeToo online consciousness-raising campaign had spread around the world, the effects of the transnational movement became visible in Croatia. A small state located in Southeastern Europe, Croatia is both a postsocialist and post-conflict state. Sharing the fate of many European postsocialist countries, it has dealt with the effects of privatisation, the restructuring of the legal system, and the development of a civil society. Moreover, as a result of the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, it has also had to deal with democratisation, state-building, and war all at the same time. One of the challenges for gender equality in its early transitional period has been the ‘strong tendencies for the retraditionalisation of Croatian society—the exclusion of women from politics and the promotion of the notion that women should take motherhood as an important measure of their success in life [...]’.<sup>35</sup> Traditional gender norms have been

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<sup>32</sup> For global perspectives, see Chandra and Erlingsdóttir (n 26).

<sup>33</sup> Magdalena Grabowska and Marta Rawluszko, ‘Polish #MeToo: When Concern for Men’s Rights Derails the Women’s Revolution’ in Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Anna Sedysheva, ‘#ЯНеБоюсьСказать (#IAmNotAfraidToSpeak), #MeToo, and the Russian Media Public Discourse around Violence against Women in Russia’ in Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Sabrina P Ramet and Davorka Matic (eds), *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education, and Media* (Texas A&M University Press, 2007) 22.

closely interlinked with nationalist ideology and any attempts to challenge gender hierarchies or gender inequality are easily perceived as attacks on the nation's traditional family system.

As Yuval-Davis and Anthias demonstrated in their seminal work *Women-Nation-State*, women play an important role in constructing national identity.<sup>36</sup> They are seen as the reproducers of the future members of the nation and considered the caretakers of the 'family'. In this role, they are reproducing the national culture for future generations, while also playing an important symbolic role in nationalist discourse, which can take different forms such as Mother, Victim and even Martyr. The glorification of motherhood has played an important part in the Croatian nation-building project.<sup>37</sup> During the 1990s war, though women were portrayed as victims and symbolised the violation of the Croatian nation, they were also regularly portrayed as suffering mothers who had lost their sons for the sake of the nation. This notion of the 'suffering mother' is deeply ingrained in Croatian culture. However, following the end of the war, the role of women as mothers changed and consequently became even more important. Since men were hailed as national heroes for establishing an independent state, women were encouraged to take on their role as mothers in order to ensure the survival of the nation. The 'suffering mother' was quickly replaced with the 'mothering mother'. Biljana Bijelić argues that the post-war period had a strong ideological impact on women's lives especially in the way that it promoted motherhood as a prestigious vocation for women.<sup>38</sup>

Though there was significant feminist resistance to the policies of the post-war period, the symbolism of motherhood has become deeply embedded in the construction of Croatian femininity. This identity is further reinforced by the nation's adoration of the Virgin Mary, the nation's ultimate symbol of motherhood. Mainly Catholic, Croatia's adoration of the Virgin Mary becomes evident annually during the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The biggest celebration takes place in Sinj, one of the largest Marian shrines in southern Croatia, which in 2016 had gathered over 100,000 believers.<sup>39</sup> This annual adoration of the 'Mother of all Croats' speaks to the power of motherhood in Croatia, which some may argue is a thing of the past. However, I argue that the power of motherhood is still relevant today, which is evident in the way motherhood is regularly promoted by public figures in the country. For

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<sup>36</sup> Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Woman-Nation-State* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> Biljana Bijelić, 'Women on the Edge of Gender Equality' in Sabrina P Ramet and Davorka Matic (eds), *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education, and Media* (Texas A&M University Press, 2007) 277.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Vedran Pavlic, 'More Than 100,000 People Celebrate Feast of Assumption of Virgin Mary in Sinj' *Total Croatia News* (15 August 2016), online: <[www.total-croatia-news.com/item/13610-more-than-100-000-people-celebrate-feast-of-assumption-of-virgin-mary-in-sinj](http://www.total-croatia-news.com/item/13610-more-than-100-000-people-celebrate-feast-of-assumption-of-virgin-mary-in-sinj)>.

example, *Storybook*, one of the leading Croatian women's magazines, celebrated International Women's Day in 2019 with a cover dedicated to motherhood as portrayed by nationally adored actresses, designers and models.<sup>40</sup> One of the cover stars was Jelena Veljača with her daughter. This particular representation of women, that took place in the midst of Croatia's #MeToo moments, suggests that present-day 'girl power' in Croatia is closely linked to motherhood and that motherhood continues to carry significant cultural power, which was evident in the way it was mobilised in the #MeToo moments.

It is within this historical, political and socio-cultural context that in October 2018, Croatian MP Ivana Ninčević-Lesandrić, from the centre-right MOST party, exclaimed in Parliament: 'Those were the 30 most painful minutes of my life'.<sup>41</sup> She was referring to the horrific experience she had when undergoing a curettage without anaesthesia following her miscarriage at a hospital in Split. Ninčević-Lesandrić's powerful testimony, in Parliament nonetheless, revived the public debate on the state of women's health care. Its reception by her fellow parliamentarians also demonstrated just how difficult it is for women to speak up about the violence they experience. Following her testimony, the Parliamentary Speaker Goran Jandroković said: 'Colleague Lesandrić, please don't, you are sharing a very intimate issue and putting me in a very uncomfortable situation' and with this attempted to change the subject.<sup>42</sup> Though the act of sharing testimonies causes discomfort it also 'announces a moment of shifting; a moment when those who have been historically oppressed are becoming subjects of history and social change'.<sup>43</sup> It is this moment and several other similar moments of shifting that this article seeks to engage with.

Ninčević-Lesandrić's testimony was aimed at the Health Minister, asking whether he intended to change the way medical institutions were treating women. Though the Minister claimed that 'it does not work like that in Croatian hospitals',<sup>44</sup> Danijela Drandić, from the non-governmental organisation

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<sup>40</sup> STORYHR, 'Sretan Dan Žena, Uz Novi Broj Storybooka u GIRL POWER TONU!' (8 March 2019), online: <<https://story.hr/Storybook/a112211/Sretan-Dan-zena-uz-novi-broj-Storybooka-u-GIRL-POWER-tonu.html>>.

<sup>41</sup> Index.hr, 'Mostovka Je Pokrenula Lavinu Zbog Mrcvarenja Žena. Hoće Li Se Ista Promijeniti?' (13 October 2018), online: <[www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/mostovka-je-pokrenula-lavinu-zbog-mrcvarenja-zena-hoce-li-se-ista-promijeniti/2030193.aspx](http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/mostovka-je-pokrenula-lavinu-zbog-mrcvarenja-zena-hoce-li-se-ista-promijeniti/2030193.aspx)> (Author's own translation).

<sup>42</sup> Dnevnik.hr, 'Jandroković nakon potresnog svjedočanstva zastupnice: "Dovodite me u vrlo neugodnu situaciju"' (12 October 2018), online: <<https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/javnost-zgrozena-reakcijom-gordana-jandrokovic-na-potresno-svjedocanstvo-ivane-nincevic-lesandric---534062.html>> (Author's own translation).

<sup>43</sup> Biljana Kašić, 'Oglasiti se svojim glasom : o utopijskim činovima i činovima otpora' in Renata Jambrešić Kirin and Sandra Prlenda (eds), *Glasom do feminističkih promjena = Voicing feminist concerns* (Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku i Centar za ženske studije, 2009) 29 (Author's own translation).

<sup>44</sup> Ana Vladislavjevic, 'Croatian MP Sparks Debate on Women's Healthcare' *Balkan Insight* (12 October 2018), online: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/12/croatian-mp-raised-a-debate-on-women-health-care-10-12-2018/>>.

RODA—*Roditelji u akciji* (Parents in action), stated otherwise. She explained that, although it was still not clear how often such situations take place, based on women's testimonies in some hospitals, there exists a serious issue with gynaecological procedures being performed without anaesthesia.<sup>45</sup> RODA was established in 2001 in Zagreb in response to the changes the Government introduced regarding maternity benefits.<sup>46</sup> The NGO describes itself as a 'community of citizens, parents and future parents, who advocate for dignified pregnancy, parenthood and childhood in Croatia'.<sup>47</sup> Its members are active in the areas of population politics, sexual education and the protection and promotion of breastfeeding. It has participated in several processes of drafting legislation, particularly the Law on Medically Assisted Fertilisation.<sup>48</sup> What is interesting about this organisation is that, though it was established within the premises of the Centre for education, consultation and research, which is a 'female feminist non-profit organisation',<sup>49</sup> RODA does not declare itself as a feminist organisation. Yet, its campaigns point to very clear feminist aims.

The testimony of Ninčević-Lesandrić not only revived the debate on women's care, it also led to the revival of RODA's #*Prekinimosutnju*<sup>50</sup> campaign, which originally launched in 2014 as part of the wider campaign '16 days of activism against violence against women'.<sup>51</sup> As part of the original #*Prekinimosutnju* campaign, RODA called on 'women to share their bad experiences of birth, as a way to begin the process of healing from trauma and as a way to resist the traditional position that requires women not to speak about (bad) experiences of birth because the only important thing is that the birth led to a healthy child'.<sup>52</sup> With this call for action, RODA utilised social media as a tool to provide women's voices with a platform and to challenge the existing patriarchal narratives of birth. In this first wave of #*Prekinimosutnju*, 154 photos of handwritten testimonies of traumatic births were shared. Following the MP's testimony and the revival of #*Prekinimosutnju*, in only four days RODA received an additional 400 handwritten testimonies. Ninčević-Lesandrić responded to the campaign by saying:

This has to have an effect. RODA will bring the written testimonies to the Ministry of Health, these are testimonies of real people with first names and last

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> RODA, 'O Rodi', online: <[www.roda.hr/udruga/o-rodii/](http://www.roda.hr/udruga/o-rodii/)>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* (Author's own translation).

<sup>48</sup> Zakon o medicinski pomognutoj oplodnji [86/2012], online: /eli/sluzbeni/2012/86/1962.

<sup>49</sup> CESI, 'O Cesi', online: <[www.cesi.hr](http://www.cesi.hr)> (Author's own translation).

<sup>50</sup> The English translation for #*Prekinimosutnju* is 'End The Silence'. '#*Prekinimosutnju*', online: <[www.prekinimosutnju.hr/](http://www.prekinimosutnju.hr/)>.

<sup>51</sup> It followed an earlier digital campaign '#*osnaZene*' ('Empowered Women'), which encouraged women to anonymously share their experiences of birth.

<sup>52</sup> RODA - *Roditelji u akciji* Facebook Page, '16 Dana Aktivizma Protiv Nasilja Nad Zenama', online: [www.facebook.com/udrugaroda/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=10152423832752051](https://www.facebook.com/udrugaroda/photos/?tab=album&album_id=10152423832752051) (Author's own translation).

names. I am curious whether a gynaecologist will, after all this, attempt to do anything like that to a woman again. They must be aware that it will go public immediately.<sup>53</sup>

It was evident that her decision to speak out was not only to encourage other women to share their stories in public, but also to spark institutional change. She later added that

it is sad that this story is being addressed by the public and the media, and not by state institutions. It is sad that only when it has happened to a politician was it possible to begin changing the situation. I did not speak up for myself, but to trigger action.<sup>54</sup>

Though Ninčević-Lesandrić's testimony and the *#Prekinimosutnju* campaign raised a lot of awareness through the media and social media, a poll provided by Indeks.hr asking readers whether they believed the state of affairs would change after the testimony of the MP. Only 39% of the 2142 participants replied with yes in contrast to the 61% who thought the moment would just pass and everything would continue as it had been.<sup>55</sup> Evidently, the public that took the time to follow the media developments on this particular issue did not believe in real transformative change taking place. Though RODA had followed up with another digital campaign under the slogan *#Ostavimotrag* (Leave a mark) and attended meetings with the Ministry of Health to discuss further actions among those an Action Plan on women's health, it is unclear what action has been taken on part of the State since then.

The *#Prekinimosutnju* campaign demonstrates that online consciousness-raising and digital activism in Croatia with the aim of encouraging women to take action by sharing their experiences of 'violence'<sup>56</sup> took place prior to the *#MeToo* campaign. This suggests that the idea of giving women a platform to share their voices originated locally and, when tracing localised genealogies, the campaign could be considered as one of the multiple origins of the transnational *#MeToo* movement.<sup>57</sup> Though originating prior to *#MeToo*, it is still interesting to consider the impact that *#MeToo* had on raising the profile of the *#Prekinimosutnju* campaign. The significant media coverage and increase in the number of testimonies that followed the revival of the campaign can be attributed not only to the fact that a Ninčević-Lesandrić a public figure spoke up, but also to the fact that the media and public's attention had already been primed by the transnational *#MeToo* movement,

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<sup>53</sup> Indeks.hr (n 41) (Author's own translation).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* (Author's own translation).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>56</sup> I use the word 'violence' in terms of institutional violence against women, as a way to portray the traumatic experiences women had as a result of being denied anaesthesia or not being informed that they have the right to anaesthesia for very painful procedures.

<sup>57</sup> Rachel Loney-Howes and others, 'Digital Footprints of *#MeToo*' (2021) *Feminist Media Studies* 1.

which had taken off exactly a year earlier. Though 400 handwritten testimonies may not seem like a lot, they nevertheless demonstrate that ‘contagious courage’ that was witnessed with the #MeToo movement. More importantly, the campaign’s focus on horrific experiences of childbirth or loss of a child reflects the contextualised experience of violence that women experience in Croatia.

However, this was just the beginning of what the BBC labelled ‘Croatia’s #MeToo moment’.<sup>58</sup> The manifestation of #MeToo in Croatia should not only be seen as online-consciousness raising campaigns. It is best described as a collection of several key moments, which brought together women from across the country regardless of their political orientation, class or ethnicity with the purpose of putting pressure on the State to take real and meaningful action to address violence against women. This was evident in the public’s response to an incident of horrific domestic violence that took place only a few weeks later on the island of Pag,<sup>59</sup> where a father threw his four young children off a second story balcony, causing them severe injuries. Actress and screenwriter, Jelena Veljača, created a Facebook group with the purpose of organising a protest under the slogan #*Spasime* (Save me) and, in less than a week, the group, which has since remained private, had 45,000 members. Veljača stated in her public Instagram post:

I did not sleep because of the children in Pag. I did not sleep because of little Denis who was killed by his mother a few years ago. I could never forget him. I didn’t sleep because of the little girl who was beaten up by her father. Since I have become a mother, I don’t sleep much ... So here, uneasy and for the first time, without politicians, but with people that support me, I will try to organise a protest #*Spasime* for all the children and women who we did not manage to save. We are responsible. The Facebook group is called #*Spasime*. Who may like to, can request to become a member.<sup>60</sup>

Veljača, with her simple but public message, responded to the events in a way that any mother could relate to. Emphasising her positioning as a woman and a mother, she called the public to gather for a protest in the memory of all who the system failed: women and children. The way Veljača, perhaps unconsciously, framed the #*Spasime* protest is significant in terms of strategy. It makes no reference to feminism, but reveals feminist actions and goals. By focusing on ‘women and children’, #*Spasime* was a campaign and protest that everyone in Croatia could support. In particular, her

<sup>58</sup> Krassi Twigg, ‘Croatian Women Challenge Brutal Pregnancy “Care”’ *BBC News* (11 January 2019), online: <[www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46803178](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46803178)>.

<sup>59</sup> Pag is an island on the Adriatic Coast located 303 km away from the capital of Zagreb. The closest coastal city is Zadar which is 50 km away.

<sup>60</sup> Večernji list, ‘Jelena Veljača dosad je na Facebooku okupila 40 tisuća ljudi: #spasime za sve koje nismo uspjeli spasiti’ (12 March 2019), online: [www.vecernji.hr/showbiz/jelena-veljaca-dosad-je-na-facebooku-okupila-40-tisuca-ljudi-spasime-za-sve-koje-nismo-uspjeli-spasiti-1306103](http://www.vecernji.hr/showbiz/jelena-veljaca-dosad-je-na-facebooku-okupila-40-tisuca-ljudi-spasime-za-sve-koje-nismo-uspjeli-spasiti-1306103) (Author’s own translation).

reference to her own motherhood linked #Spasime to the already existing motherhood narrative displayed in the #Prekinimosutnju campaign. Though referring only to ‘women and children’ is exclusionary by nature, in the Croatian context it has the potential to attract more attention and support particularly from the part of the population that supports traditional ideas of the family unit, which will be discussed below.

On 16 March 2019 thousands of supporters of Veljača’s anti-domestic violence movement gathered in cities across the country: in Zagreb, Split and Dubrovnik. As Veljača stated, the purpose was ‘to show Croatia’s solidarity with victims of violence and demand that the system adequately protect them’.<sup>61</sup> The #Spasime movement demanded tougher measures against domestic violence and more training for employees in state institutions. Oddly, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković attended the protest, stating that he was there ‘less as the Prime Minister and more as a concerned citizen’.<sup>62</sup> Some have questioned his attendance and pointed out that the message was clearly aimed at the Government to take action. This suggests the dual purpose of the protest: on the one hand to show victims that the public is paying attention and to send a message to the Government.

As the title of Amnesty International’s submission for the 2020 UN Universal Periodic Review states, ‘existing laws are failing victims of domestic violence’ in Croatia.<sup>63</sup> The numbers on domestic violence in Croatia are troubling. In 2019 alone, 9626 individuals were reported for misdemeanour crimes of domestic violence, of which 77.7% were men.<sup>64</sup> In 2019, the Ombudsman’s report found a significant increase of 28% from the previous year in violent crimes related to the family, which resulted in 4641 victims of which 78% were women.<sup>65</sup> In 2019 alone, 10 women were killed by an intimate partner or another male family member and according to the Ombudsman’s analysis, the trigger for murder is often the decision of the wife or partner to leave the relationship.<sup>66</sup> The report also found that institutional responses were slow or inadequate.<sup>67</sup>

Though there are serious problems with institutional responses, there are also issues with the laws addressing domestic violence. At the time of the

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid* (Author’s own translation).

<sup>62</sup> Večernji list, ‘Na prosvjedu #spasime i Plenković. “Zašto je samo 8% nasilnika osuđeno na bezuvjetnu kaznu?”’, (16 March 2019), online: <[www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-pet-do-12h-pocinje-prosvjed-nulta-stopa-tolerancije-1307151](http://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-pet-do-12h-pocinje-prosvjed-nulta-stopa-tolerancije-1307151)> (Author’s own translation).

<sup>63</sup> Amnesty International, *Croatia: Existing Laws Are Failing Victims of Domestic Violence (AI Submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review, 36th Session of the UPR Working Group)* (2020), online: <[www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur64/2842/2020/en/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur64/2842/2020/en/)>.

<sup>64</sup> Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova, *Sazetak Izvjesca o Radu Za 2019* (2019), 12 online: <[www.prs.hr/application/images/uploads/IZVJE%C5%A0%C4%86A/SAZETAK\\_IZVJESCE\\_ZA\\_2019\\_PRAVOB.pdf](http://www.prs.hr/application/images/uploads/IZVJE%C5%A0%C4%86A/SAZETAK_IZVJESCE_ZA_2019_PRAVOB.pdf)>.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

#Spasime protest, the new Law on Protection against Domestic Violence, which entered into force in 2018, had only made some progress in addressing the issues. For example, it ‘strengthens existing misdemeanour sanctions for domestic violence, and provides additional remedies, including protective measures, for survivors’.<sup>68</sup> However, it still excludes ‘persons who do not have children with their partner, who do not share the same residence with their partner, or who have lived with their partner for less than three years’.<sup>69</sup> As activists have pointed out, the problem lies in the way ‘family’ is defined in both Family Law and Law on Protection against Domestic Violence.<sup>70</sup> With penalties for criminal offenses rarely awarded and protective measures inconsistently applied,<sup>71</sup> the trust in the judicial system is greatly undermined.

It was precisely the lack of trust in the judicial system that gathered the crowds again in October 2019, exactly two years after #MeToo went viral across the globe. Once again, a hashtag was used to circulate information about the protest and to raise awareness about the case in question. Similar to the #Spasime protest, the #Pravdazadjevojke protest took place in cities across the country. However, this time it was not about domestic violence, but about sexual violence. The trigger was the release of five young men who were accused of gang raping, harassing and blackmailing a 15-year-old girl in the area of Zadar. Several women’s rights groups organised and gathered under the slogan #Pravdazadjevojke (Justice for Girls) and accused the judge of the Zadar County Court of supporting impunity because he had failed to remand the five young men in investigative custody while the allegations were being investigated by authorities. Protesters demanded ‘disciplinary proceedings conducted against the judge that released the suspects, for the case to be moved to another court, and a change to the criminal law in terms of stricter sentences for rape’.<sup>72</sup>

Not long after the protest, the Government submitted into parliamentary procedure several amendments to the Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Act and the Protection from Domestic Violence Act, which aimed to introduce stricter penalties for domestic violence and violence against women. It would also abolish the separate offence of ‘sexual intercourse without consent’,<sup>73</sup> which was introduced with the amendments to the

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<sup>68</sup> Amnesty International (n 63) 5.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova, *Izješće o Radu Za 2018* (2018) 119 online: <[www.prs.hr/application/images/uploads/IZVJE%C5%A0%C4%86A/Izve%C5%A1%C4%87e\\_o\\_radu\\_Pravobraniteljice%20za%202018%20godinu.pdf](http://www.prs.hr/application/images/uploads/IZVJE%C5%A0%C4%86A/Izve%C5%A1%C4%87e_o_radu_Pravobraniteljice%20za%202018%20godinu.pdf)>.

<sup>72</sup> Ana Vladislavjević, ‘Croatia Protesters Demand “Justice for Girls”’ *Balkan Insight* (19 October 2010), online: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/19/croatia-protesters-demand-justice-for-girls/>>.

<sup>73</sup> In practice, this had a ‘highly detrimental impact on the prosecution of rape, with most cases of marital rape’ prosecuted as ‘sexual intercourse without consent’ and perpetrators sentenced to minimum penalties of six months or less. See Amnesty International (n 63) 7.

Criminal Code in 2013, qualifying it as rape. The package of laws entered into force on 1 January 2020.<sup>74</sup> However, as Ivana Radačić<sup>75</sup> had highlighted ‘if stricter sentences could solve the problem on their own, then the US would not still be confronting problems of sexual violence, because they have very stringent sentences for such crimes’.<sup>76</sup> Radačić refers to the problem raised by a growing body of feminist work on the ways in which contemporary legal responses to violence against women are bound up with strategies of neo-liberal governmentality.<sup>77</sup> Though pushing for institutional and legal change is necessary in Croatia, the challenge is to be ‘vigilant regarding the motivations behind [any] developments, as well as their implications for women’s agency and safety’.<sup>78</sup>

Croatia’s #MeToo moments are not only calls for necessary change and displays of solidarity, they also announce what Biljana Kašić calls ‘moment [s] of shifting’.<sup>79</sup> Women’s experiences of violence shifted from the private coffee table conversations to the public space and were shared by the women themselves. With each subsequent moment, the shifting unveiled additional dimensions of violence experienced by women in Croatia. As demonstrated, an important thread connects the three moments. Similar to #Prekinimosutnju and #Spasime, #Pravdazadjevojciće with its focus on ‘girls’ who are daughters of mothers, also mobilised strong cultural notions of motherhood. All three moments contributed to a narrative that illuminated the unspoken stories of motherhood: horrific experiences of childbirth, violence in the family home, and fear for daughters’ safety. This powerful narrative established a common interest shared by both feminists and conservative groups, which discouraged backlash similar to what happened with the Government’s ratification of the Council of Europe’s Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

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<sup>74</sup> Zakon o izmjenama i dopunama Kaznenog zakona [126/2019], online: <[https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019\\_12\\_126\\_2529.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_12_126_2529.html)>; Zakon o izmjenama i dopunama Zakona o kaznenom postupku [126/2019], online: <[https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019\\_12\\_126\\_2530.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_12_126_2530.html)>; Zakon o dopuni Zakona o zaštiti od nasilja u obitelji [126/2019], online: <[https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019\\_12\\_126\\_2531.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_12_126_2531.html)>.

<sup>75</sup> Dr Ivana Radačić published a book on *Sexual violence - Myths, Stereotypes and the Legal System* (TIM Press, 2014) where she analysed 64 judgements related to rape in Croatia. She is currently a member of the UN Working Group on the Discrimination of Women and Girls.

<sup>76</sup> Slavica Lukic, ‘Zasto se u Hrvatskoj ne vjeruje silovanim zenama?’ *Jutarnji List* (19 October 2019), online: <[www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/zasto-se-u-hrvatskoj-ne-vjeruje-silovanim-zenama-cak-me-jedna-drzavna-odvjetnica-pitala-sto-je-zrtva-imala-raditi-na-nekom-mjestu-odjevena-u-minici-9506120](http://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/zasto-se-u-hrvatskoj-ne-vjeruje-silovanim-zenama-cak-me-jedna-drzavna-odvjetnica-pitala-sto-je-zrtva-imala-raditi-na-nekom-mjestu-odjevena-u-minici-9506120)> (Author’s own translation).

<sup>77</sup> See Vanessa E Munro, ‘Violence Against Women, “Victimhood” and the (Neo)Liberal State’ in Margaret Davies and Vanessa E. Munro (eds) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Feminist Legal Theory* (Routledge, 2016); Kristin Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence* (Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Munro (n 77) 244.

<sup>79</sup> Kašić (n 43) 29.

The next part considers the effects of the transnational anti-gender movement that opposes so-called gender ideology, reflecting on the strategies used by its local actors and the challenges it poses to transforming social and cultural ideas of gender relations.

#### 4. Other transnational movements: the challenge of anti-gender campaigns

In recent years, the strongest opposition to progressive causes in Croatia has come from the anti-gender movement that is part of a transnational phenomenon. Some of the earliest examples can be traced back to Paraguay in 2011, as a result of discussions on the national education plan and how it would include the term ‘gender’. Later, a similar movement was witnessed in 2013 in Ecuador and, since 2014, massive mobilisation has taken place in numerous countries around the world.<sup>80</sup>

Local instantiations of anti-gender movements are characterised by a loose collection of civil-society organisations, political parties and religious figures (often Catholic, but not exclusively), that work together in campaigns opposing a variety of causes, such as women’s reproductive rights, gender education, and LGBT+ rights. They employ common and sophisticated strategies of mobilisation, including significant media savvy, and very often focus their narratives around the notion of ‘gender ideology’, an all-encompassing and derogatory term that refers to progressive views on gender and any form of gender mainstreaming.<sup>81</sup> In Croatia, backlash against gender equality and women’s rights, promoted by anti-gender campaigns, has been a growing challenge, especially for the past decade. The strength of the anti-gender movement in Croatia became widely apparent when some of its key actors, and in particular the NGO *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family), were successful in calling for, and winning the vote in, a referendum to amend the Constitution and include the definition of marriage as the union between a man and a woman. Most recently, the movement opposed the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, arguing that it was introducing ‘gender ideology’ into the Croatian legal and educational system. These groups organised a protest on 24 March 2018 that gathered thousands of attendees in the centre of Zagreb.<sup>82</sup> The Istanbul Convention

<sup>80</sup> Sonia Correa, David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, ‘The Globalisation of Anti-Gender Campaigns’ *IPS Democracy and Society* (31 May 2018), online: <[www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761/](http://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761/)>.

<sup>81</sup> David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, ‘The Anti-Gender Movement in Comparative Perspective’ in Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Eszter Kováts, ‘The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy’ in Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan and Andrea Pető (eds), *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe* (Springer International Publishing, 2017).

<sup>82</sup> Miguel Alcalde and Josipa Šarić, ‘The Istanbul Convention in Croatia: Attending to the Anxiety in the Intersection of Belief and Policy-Making’ *LSE Religion and Global Society Blog* (9 April 2018), online:

was eventually ratified and entered into force on 1 October 2018, only a few weeks before Ninčević-Lesandrić's testimony triggered the first Croatian #MeToo moment. In this part, I consider the potential of Croatia's #MeToo moments against the backdrop of the existing anti-gender movement.

The Croatian anti-gender movement is similar to other European movements against 'gender ideology'. However, it also uses some 'specific, locally articulated strategies and discourses', which are a result of the postsocialist and post-conflict context and are 'characterised by a surge of religious self-identification and nationalist rhetoric'.<sup>83</sup> Preserving national identity and traditional gender relations are important for this movement. This is evident in the way that the 'gender ideology' discourse perceives 'the "natural" heterosexual family (and children raised in such families) [as] endangered and [in need of protection]'.<sup>84</sup> Similar to what is seen with feminist digital awareness-raising campaigns, the strategies employed by the anti-gender movement in Croatia include 'the use of new communication technologies' as a way to 'mobilise discontent and to recruit supporters'.<sup>85</sup> It has also 'attempted to reverse the (Western) cultural dynamics [by] skillfully using traditional collective action (eg Demonstrations and petitioning) and legal mechanisms'.<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, though its aims have been to 're-traditionalise Croatian society' it has greatly relied on 'modernistic imagery and terms, emphasising human rights, freedom of choice and the protection of children'.<sup>87</sup>

Similar to other contexts, 'gender ideology' is perceived by the Croatian anti-gender movement as a 'Western import' that threatens the fabric of Croatian society because it threatens the 'natural' order of gender relations, which is the bedrock of Croatian identity. When this narrative met the ratification of an international treaty aimed at tackling violence against women and domestic violence, which is also based on the social-constructionist view of gender, the two issues inevitably collapsed into one. The part of the population with a strong sense of national identity, often religious and with conservative attitudes about gender relations, perceived the Istanbul Convention as a tool that would threaten their identity. While public discussions could have been about the widespread problems surrounding violence

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<<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2018/04/the-istanbul-convention-in-croatia-attending-to-the-anxiety-in-the-intersection-of-belief-and-policy-making/>>.

<sup>83</sup> Amir Hodzic and Aleksandar Stulhofer, 'Embryo, Teddy Bear-Centaur and the Constitution: Mobilizations against "Gender Ideology" and Sexual Permissiveness in Croatia' in Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) 59.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

against women and domestic violence, instead, the public was consumed with the ‘gender ideology’ narrative. This became apparent in the way that parishioners were encouraged by several Catholic bishops and priests to oppose the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the way that the conservative NGO *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family) and the citizens’ initiative *Istina o Istanbulskoj* (Truth about Istanbul’s [Convention]) spread anti-gender views about the Convention ‘through media appearances and events organised across the country’.<sup>88</sup> This eventually led to the protest against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. As the attention of the media and public was primarily focused on the debate around the definition of gender, any possible consciousness-raising regarding violence against women and domestic violence that the ratification of the Istanbul Convention could have triggered was severely hindered.

It is against this backdrop that this author reflects on the transformative potential of Croatia’s #MeToo moments. In contrast to its reporting on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the media’s representations of the different #MeToo moments primarily focused on violence that women and children experience in Croatia and showed no evidence of challenging the #MeToo campaigns. In regard to the #Prekinimosutnju campaign, both mainstream and radical right-wing media focused primarily on women’s horrific experiences in hospitals when undergoing curettage procedures without anaesthesia. Though this is essentially an issue regarding reproductive rights, the radical right-wing media stayed within the motherhood narrative but continued to focus the attention on violence against women. To a certain extent, it is this motherhood narrative that allowed the right-wing media to address violence against women in a way that was acceptable to the religious conservatives and those fearing for their national identity.

A similar pattern is evident in the way Dnevno.hr and Direktno.hr, ultra-conservative portals, reported on the #Spasime campaign. While Dnevno.hr had in the past published a headline stating ‘Istanbul Convention: Is it legalising paedophilia?’<sup>89</sup> thus discouraging its readers from supporting the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, in its articles on #Spasime, it primarily quoted Veljača’s initial social media post. By re-publishing Veljača’s post, where she, among other things, writes ‘[s]ince I have become a mother, I don’t sleep much ...’,<sup>90</sup> the right-wing media had endorsed the motherhood narrative and its link to the protection of women and children. This is also evident in the way the same media reported on the #Pravdazadjevovice campaign. By refraining to engage with the subject and merely re-

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<sup>88</sup> Alcalde and Šarić (n 82).

<sup>89</sup> Marin Vlahovic, ‘Istanbulska konvencija: Legalizira li se njome pedofilija?’ *Dnevno.hr* (13 October 2017), online: <[www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/istanbulska-konvencija-legalizira-li-se-konvencijom-pedofilija-1076998/](http://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/istanbulska-konvencija-legalizira-li-se-konvencijom-pedofilija-1076998/)> (Author’s own translation).

<sup>90</sup> Večernji list (n 60).

publishing what was stated on social media by the organisers of the campaigns, the conservative and right-wing media reinforced the motherhood narrative that drew attention to the protection of women and children.

The discourse of motherhood was a unifying factor in mobilising activism seeking to address violence against women in Croatia. Unlike the relentless debate that took place around the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the motherhood narrative enabled Croatia's #MeToo moments to raise greater awareness about violence against women and domestic violence in Croatia and to generate momentum for legal and institutional change. Though motherhood as a unifying factor presents transnational feminism with an opportunity for reflection, it also raises serious questions about the potentials and risks of such mobilisation, particularly in the Croatian context. When violence against women and domestic violence are narrated as the suffering of mothers, there is no challenge to the 'natural' order of gender relations or national identity. The next section discusses the implications of utilising motherhood as a way to build solidarity and push for change.

## 5. The potentials and risks of motherhood mobilisation

From a feminist perspective, mobilising the maternal identity is a troubling strategy. It relies heavily on 'traditional gender norms and nationalist and religious fundamentalisms'.<sup>91</sup> This is particularly problematic in Croatia. Utilising motherhood risks further entrenching discriminatory behaviour that stems from gender essentialism, heteronormativity and transphobia. For example, the narrative that surfaced throughout the #MeToo moments presented a very homogenous experience of violence against women and domestic violence. There was very little evidence of varied experiences depending on class, religion, and ethnicity, even less on gender. In addition, maternal identity regularly places social pressures on women to become mothers and 'inadvertently reinforces the notion that all women should be mothers or that women's proper place is the home'.<sup>92</sup> Apart from social pressures, the motherhood discourse has also been used by regimes to justify measures of state control put in place over women's lives, which is usually re-enforced 'by stressing the importance of mothers in preserving traditions and maintaining societal stability'.<sup>93</sup> This was particularly

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<sup>91</sup> Anwar Mhajne and Crystal Whetstone, 'Troubling Conceptions of Motherhood: State Feminism and Political Agency of Women in the Global South' in Lucy B Hall, Anna L Weissman and Laura J Shepherd (eds), *Troubling Motherhood: Maternity in Global Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2020) 158.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 157; See also Patrice Diquinzio, 'Exclusion and Essentialism in Feminist Theory: The Problem of Mothering' (1993) 8 *Hypatia* 1.

<sup>93</sup> Mhajne and Whetstone (n 91) 158; See also Michelle E Carreon and Valentine M Moghadam, "'Resistance Is Fertile": Revisiting Maternalist Frames across Cases of Women's Mobilization' (2015) 51 *Women's Studies International Forum* 19.

evident in the way the post-war Croatian government framed women's role in society.<sup>94</sup>

However, as O'Reilly has demonstrated, motherhood has played an important role in women's lives by providing women with agency.<sup>95</sup> One of the greatest challenges for feminist and women's rights activists in post-socialist and authoritarian regimes (and illiberal democracies like Russia), has been the ways in which the state and conservative forces have tried to discredit them and their work. These forces employ strategies with which they label work on gender equality as 'imported imperialistic practice aiming at destroying the cultural fabric of society'.<sup>96</sup> In these contexts, where women have also been 'hypervisibilised'<sup>97</sup> by the state, respectability politics has been an effective tool for 'bargaining with patriarchy'.<sup>98</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti first coined the term 'bargaining with patriarchy' as a way to explain the strategies that women use 'within a set of concrete constraints', which Mhajne and Whetstone have expanded to explain the way women 'negotiate their identities as mothers to legitimise their political participation'.<sup>99</sup> They explain how women's reliance on 'respectability', which has been assigned to them by the state due to their role as mothers, allows them to use motherhood subversively and create political movements.<sup>100</sup> For example, in Egypt, women have utilised their labelling as respectable in demonstrations, making it difficult for the state to portray protestors as immoral terrorists.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, though not part of a conscious strategy in the Croatian context, the presence of the motherhood narrative in the #MeToo moments made it difficult for the conservative and right-wing forces to discredit the organisers and their protests due to the respectable status motherhood carries culturally in Croatian society.

The reliance on motherhood politics is not new to Croatia or the Balkan region. Prior to the break-up of Yugoslavia, The Committee of Mothers for the Return of Soldiers was a well organised wartime organisation with headquarters in Zagreb and sister organisations throughout the different Yugoslav republics. At the onset of the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Committee organised an action under the name *Bedem ljubavi* (Wall of Love), which was meant to symbolise mothers' love for their children and demand

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<sup>94</sup> Bijelić (n 37) 277.

<sup>95</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* (Demeter Press, 2016).

<sup>96</sup> Mhajne and Whetstone (n 91) 160.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Amar coined the term 'hypervisibility' to explain 'processes whereby racialized, sexualised subjects, or the marked bodies of subordinate classes, become intensely visible as objects of state, police and media gazes and as targets of fear and desire'. See Paul Amar, 'Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out? Charging the Police with Sexual Harassment in Egypt' (2011) 13 *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 305.

<sup>98</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy' (1988) 2 *Gender & Society* 274.

<sup>99</sup> Mhajne and Whetstone (n 91) 157.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

peace.<sup>102</sup> The purpose of the action was to push the Yugoslav states to release their soldier-sons from their military service in the Yugoslav National Army and allow them to return home. Though great in numbers, the Committee broke apart along ethnic lines and was later incorporated into individual state nationalist projects. The existence and disintegration of one of the greatest organisations of mothers in former Yugoslavia, right at the onset of the war, points to some important implications. It suggests that maternal politicisation has historical roots in the region, pointing to the strong cultural norm of motherhood. The disintegration of the organisation, on the other hand, points to the challenge that nationalism poses to such movements. Unlike in Argentina, where the Madres de Plaza de Mayo was a symbol of continued resistance to the junta,<sup>103</sup> in Croatia motherhood mobilisation was co-opted by the nationalist government and, for this reason, it is still at risk of co-option by conservative and right-wing forces.

Motherhood is a powerful cultural notion and carries with it a respectable identity in Croatian society. As this analysis of Croatia's #MeToo moments shows, the motherhood narrative led to a situation where issues such as domestic violence and sexual violence became a common interest for both feminists and conservative forces. As a result of this common interest in ending violence against women, feminists were not challenged by conservative forces in the manner that they were discredited when discussions on the Istanbul Convention were taking place. Though motherhood politics does present an opportunity for feminist strategising, when the historical, political and cultural context is taken into consideration, serious issues regarding diversity and risks of co-option are revealed. Nevertheless, this examination of the effects of motherhood politics presents an opportunity for further reflection on what meaningful transnational feminist solidarity entails.

## 6. What is meaningful transnational feminist solidarity?

The introductory vignette captures how a leading figure in one of the local #MeToo campaigns shows reluctance to work alongside feminists who advocated against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, referring to ideological differences.<sup>104</sup> Similar reluctance can be observed in the way transnational feminist scholarship engages with difference. Is transnational feminism only engaging with feminists with whom it agrees? How does one engage productively with difference, especially difference that is based on views on gender? How can one engage in transnational feminist solidarity meaningfully? Swati Parashar claims that 'selective recognition of struggles,

<sup>102</sup> Jelena Batinić, 'Feminism, Nationalism, and War: The "Yugoslav Case" in Feminist Texts' (2001) 3 *Journal of International Women's Studies* 1, 3–4.

<sup>103</sup> Mhajne and Whetstone (n 91) 165–7.

<sup>104</sup> *Nedjeljom u 2 - Jelena Veljača* (n 3).

voices and discursive locations’ is hindering transnational feminist solidarity and encourages transnational feminists to engage in a more ‘open and frank dialogue to address the fear of the “unknown” and understand difference’.<sup>105</sup> Most importantly, she calls for transnational feminists to engage in radical self-reflection.

The difficulty with engaging with difference in the Croatian context is that it requires engaging with difference based on ideas of gender. As demonstrated in this article, this engagement may be helpful in order to work towards a common interest, such as ending violence against women. However, the problem lies in the risks and how to best engage with those who ignore or discredit feminist knowledge on gender. In this regard, Parashar’s suggestion of ‘empathetic critique’ is helpful. She suggests that transnational feminists may want to begin by reminding themselves that ‘feminist solidarity is not about getting people on the same side or even convincing them’ and that feminism started as a ‘politics that was not afraid of outraging the society, of saying the most uncomfortable things, or raising the most troubling questions’.<sup>106</sup> With this in mind, transnational feminists may want to engage with groups such as Catholic feminists and, through frank dialogue, get a better understanding of the ideological differences, particularly when it comes to gender. But most importantly, transnational feminists should continue to engage in rigorous self-reflexivity. For transnational feminist solidarity to be meaningful, it is necessary to continuously confront oneself and ask ‘who am I ignoring?’ and ‘who am I “saving”?’ even in one’s effort to provide space to all voices and perspectives.

## 7. Conclusion

In order to engage with the meaningfulness of transnational feminist solidarity, this article examined the Croatian manifestation of #MeToo, a transnational feminist solidarity movement that emerged as a digital consciousness-raising campaign in the US. An analysis of the three Croatian #MeToo moments, #Prekinimosutnju, #Spasime and #Pravdazadjevojice, uncovered several contextual complexities. It showed how mobilisation centred on notions of motherhood that are linked to ‘patriarchal forces intrinsic to the culture’<sup>107</sup> was able to focus attention on the protection of women and children against violence while deterring a gender equality backlash. It also revealed the motherhood narrative’s potential to disregard diversity and its risk of co-option. By considering the potentials and risks of the Croatian

<sup>105</sup> Swati Parashar, ‘Is Transnational Feminist Solidarity Possible?’ in Jill Steans and Daniela Tepe (eds), *Handbook on Gender in World Politics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016) 118.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–4.

<sup>107</sup> Chandra and Erlingsdóttir (n 26) 213.

#MeToo campaigns and how these relate to broader discussions on transnational feminism, the article calls for continuous radical self-reflexivity.

### **Disclosure statement**

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