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## **Agents of Change. Women's Advocacy during Democratization in Croatia**

**Abstract.** This article investigates how Croatian women's NGOs have contributed to gender policy in Croatia and what instruments they have used at the state level in drafting, initiating, and adopting innovative gender policy. It argues that, as norm advocates, Croatian women's NGOs have adopted a double strategy: first, calling attention to the Croatian government's non-compliance with international norms on women's rights and second, enforcing change. Based on the advocacy of Croatian women's NGOs, the author introduces the double-strategy model of norm implementation. The methodology is descriptive, whereas the analysis is based both on interviews and on published secondary data.

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### **Introduction**

Croatia was one of the first republics to declare its independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Forming part of the Yugoslav Wars of Succession, the Serbo-Croatian War ended in 1995 after four years of warfare and violence. Croatian women were drastically affected by the conflict, the postwar economic collapse, and nationalism, which marginalized them and their interests. They were excluded from political decision-making, and gender equality issues were completely ignored in the public sphere and by national decision makers. In particular, domestic violence was a serious problem. After the war, violence against women increased rapidly, and in the first half of the 1990s, legislation did not adequately protect women from violence, domestic or otherwise.<sup>1</sup> For a long time, domestic violence was considered a 'private

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Špehar, *How Women's Movements Matter. Women's Movements' Strategies and Influence on Gender Policy Formation in Post-Communist Croatia and Slovenia*, Göteborg 2007, 92, [http://www.pol.gu.se/digitalAssets/1312/1312989\\_dissertation.pdf](http://www.pol.gu.se/digitalAssets/1312/1312989_dissertation.pdf). All internet sources were accessed on 15 December 2016.

matter' exempt from judicial and state intervention. The government did not collect statistics on gender-based violence, but women's NGOs have recorded an increase in various forms of violence against women during this period. In 1997, for instance, reported cases of domestic violence increased by 11%. The number of SOS-lines provided by local women's NGOs to support domestic violence victims increased, too.<sup>2</sup> It was only in 2003 that the first Gender Equality Act and the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence were passed.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this unfavourable situation, the government adopted a number of women's rights norms in the field of gender equality between 2001 and 2005.<sup>4</sup> It has taken measures to better protect women and girls from violence, promote equal opportunities, and implement the requirements of international women's human rights norms, as codified in international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The percentage of women in the parliament has increased from 7.1% in 1995 to 21.9% in 2001. In addition, in the last decade Croatia has developed a number of institutional mechanisms to promote and implement gender equality. Because Croatian women's NGOs have emerged as a strong network, pushing gender equality and advocating for political and legal changes, I argue that the success achieved during this time has been mainly due to their efforts.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I address how women's NGOs have contributed to the progress made in gender equality in Croatia. I focus on the role of international women's human rights norms, codified in international mechanisms such as CEDAW, in enabling gender-specific norms to unfold at the national level. I reconstruct how international women's human rights norms were implemented between 1991 and 2007, and the role of women's NGOs in this implementation.<sup>6</sup> I examined both how these NGOs interacted with national and international actors, and the accomplishments they achieved during this period. I interviewed women's rights activists, parliamentary representatives, scholars, staff members at international organizations, and international donors. Almost all interviews were

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<sup>2</sup> The International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP), Croatia, <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/iwraw/publications/countries/croatia.htm>; interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia and Women's ad hoc coalition 1999, Bojana Genov, Mali Lošinj, Croatia, 22 August 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Jenichen, *Politische Innovation in internationalisierten Nachkriegskontexten. Bösische Frauenrechtspolitik in vergleichender Perspektive*, Wiesbaden 2012, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Jenichen, *Politische Innovation in internationalisierten Nachkriegskontexten*.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia; interview with the coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI, Sanja Cesar, Zagreb, Croatia, 27 August 2013; cf. Špehar, *How Women's Movements Matter*; Maja Dubljević, *Ženska politika za vrijeme i nakon Tuđmana. Ili kako se tvrdokornost patrijarhata očituje u hrvatskom društvu*, *Kruh i Ruže*, no. 17 (2003), 31-40.

<sup>6</sup> Research for this study was conducted on a trip to Croatia in the summer of 2013.

conducted in the Croatian language. I collected documents, reports, and other materials put out by women's NGOs and used by them in their campaigns. My analysis also builds on my own experience and relationships I cultivated while working for the women's human rights group Lošinj in Croatia (1996-2001). Data for this article also come from informal interviews and everyday interactions with women activists, as well as from NGO conferences and other gatherings I attended.

### **International Norms. A Dynamic and Ongoing Process**

I use the constructivist definition of norms as shared collective expectations of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity, unlike ideas which may be held by each individual.<sup>7</sup> In line with Wiener, I also see norms as a part of international treaties, conventions, or agreements.<sup>8</sup> Norm advocates use existing norms as instruments to influence policymaking and generate new norms. However, norms are also 'processes as work in progress'<sup>9</sup> and 'open-ended'.<sup>10</sup> Mona Lena Krook and Jacqui True, advocating a constructivist definition, observe that international norms tend to be vague, enabling their content to be filled in many ways and appropriated for diverse purposes.<sup>11</sup> For example, CEDAW is a tangible instrument that codifies diverse women's human rights norms. Women's NGOs use CEDAW to legitimize their actions and, at the same time, seek to have these international norms implemented into national policies.

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<sup>7</sup> Martha Finnemore / Kathryn Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998), 887-917, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361>; Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*, Ithaca 1996; Birgit Locher, *Internationale Normen und regionaler Policy-Wandel. Frauenhandel in der Europäischen Union*, *Welt-Trends* 36 (2002), 59-80; Roland L. Jepperson et al., *Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security*, in: Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security. Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York 1996, 26-42; Thomas Risse / Stephen C. Ropp / Kathryn Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change*, Cambridge 1999; Ann E. Towns, *Women and States. Norms and Hierarchies in International Society*, Cambridge 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Antje Wiener, *Enacting Meaning-in-Use. Qualitative Research on Norms and International Relations*, *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009), 175-193, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S02602105090008377>.

<sup>9</sup> Mona Lena Krook / Jacqui True, *Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms. The United Nations and the Global Promotion of Gender Equality*, *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no.1 (2010), 103-127, DOI: 10.1177/1354066110380963.

<sup>10</sup> Susanne Zwingel, *How Do Norms Travel? Theorizing International Women's Rights in Transnational Perspective*, *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (2012), 115-129, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00701.x.

<sup>11</sup> Krook / True, *Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms*.

Using their norm 'life cycle' model, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink<sup>12</sup> explain how international norms emerge. For international norms to emerge, norm entrepreneurs<sup>13</sup> or norm advocates must convince a critical mass of other actors to adopt a new norm, and a platform for action that enables them to carry out their activities. Hence 'all norm promoters at the international level need some kind of organizational platform from and through which they promote their norms'.<sup>14</sup> The norm 'life cycle', according to Finnemore and Sikkink, consists of three main stages: 1) norm emergence, 2) norm cascade (or general acceptance of the idea as a norm), and 3) internalization. In the first stage, norm entrepreneurs arise with a belief that something must be changed. If enough states adopt the new norm, a 'tipping point' is reached, 'at which a critical mass of relevant state actors adopt the norm'.<sup>15</sup> The life cycle moves to the second stage, norm cascade. Eventually, norms are internalized. At the national level, I use this model in my case study of Croatia.

Keck and Sikkink's 'boomerang effect' and Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink's 'spiral model' explain how norms diffuse from global to local even when states ignore international norms.<sup>16</sup> The boomerang effect involves local NGOs bypassing their government and directly searching out powerful international allies, such as Western governments, to pressure their state/government from outside. This effect usually occurs when channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked, as is the case mostly in non-democratic societies. This process by which international human rights norms are implemented domestically is understood as a process of socialization.

This article claims—unlike most of the literature on global norm diffusion—that it is not only national actors who need to be socialized to comply with gender-sensitive international norms and standards, but also the international political elite and Western governments. Hence it looks at how norms are incorporated into the policies of international actors, as well as into domestic policies, in conflict and post-conflict societies. The second question to be asked is, which norms matter?

The Croatian government did not take seriously its obligation to enforce gender equality norms codified in CEDAW at the local level. I argue that gender issues were also not a priority for the international community involved in

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<sup>12</sup> Finnemore / Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*.

<sup>13</sup> In this paper, since I am analyzing the advocacy work of women's NGOs, I find the term 'norm advocates' better suited to describe this process than the commonly applied concept of 'norm entrepreneurs'.

<sup>14</sup> Finnemore / Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, 899.

<sup>15</sup> Finnemore / Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, 895.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret E. Keck / Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders. Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca 1998; Risse / Ropp / Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights*.

relief aid and development. Even Western governments and representatives of international organizations were either unaware of gender relations, or completely ignored them. United Nations Security Council Resolution 743 (1992) established the United Nations Protection Force mission (UNPROFOR) in protection zones (United Nations Protected Areas, UNPA) with a Serb majority. The mission involved around fourteen thousand UN staff and is not considered to have been successful; despite the UN peacekeepers, the worst atrocities were committed at this time. In addition, the mission has been accused of corruption, prostitution, and smuggling.<sup>17</sup> It therefore had a rather negative impact on the protection of women in Croatia. Hence this article examines how norms have been translated not only into domestic policies, but also into the policies of international actors who were either unaware of the women's human rights situation in Croatia, or did not themselves comply with international women's human rights norms. This is an important point, because Croatian women's NGOs depended on ideological and financial support from foreign organizations and governments. They reported directly to the UN CEDAW Committee about the misconduct of UNPROFOR forces and about the significant increase in prostitution that happened with the arrival of UNPROFOR.<sup>18</sup> These reports aimed to sensitize international actors such as the UN directly. Croatia ratified CEDAW in 1992. Countries who have become party to the treaty must submit regular reports to the CEDAW Committee on how the rights of the Convention are implemented. NGOs can submit country shadow (alternative) reports to the Committee too. The Croatian government submitted its first report in 1994. The CEDAW Committee first reviewed this country report in 1998, when Croatian women's NGOs submitted the alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW.<sup>19</sup>

Croatian women's human rights advocates had a 'double' task: on the one hand, they had to pressure the local and national authorities and inform the international community about women's human rights in Croatia; on the other hand, they had to address their government's non-compliance with international instruments such as CEDAW. Based on an analysis of the advocacy of these organizations, I introduce the double-strategy model of women's human rights norm implementation. This model has four phases: 1) the orientation phase,

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<sup>17</sup> Ivica Muškulin, An Avoidable Failure. Peacekeeping in Croatia, 1991-1995, *Review of Croatian History* 7, no. 1 (2011), 37-77.

<sup>18</sup> Ženska grupa Lošinj, Izvještaj nevladinih udruga o položaju žena u Republici Hrvatskoj, Lošinj 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Bojana Genov, Značenje Konvencije o ukidanju svih oblika diskriminacije žena u radu nevladinih organizacija, in: Dubravka Šimonović, ed, Kratak vodič kroz CEDAW-Konvenciju o uklanjanju svih oblika diskriminacije žena i njezinu primjenu u Republici Hrvatskoj, Zagreb 2004, 71-79; Dubravka Šimonović, ed, Kratak vodič kroz CEDAW, 9-10.

2) the agenda-setting phase, 3) the policy creation phase, and 4) the norm implementation phase. During the orientation phase, national stakeholders (e.g. local and national governments) ignore violations of women's rights. Women's NGOs define the problem, look for national and international support, and network in the region to put the topic on the political agenda, both nationally and internationally. In the agenda-setting phase, the NGOs use different instruments and strategies to pressure local and national government. The policy creation phase is a crucial phase, but also the shortest because the government and the NGOs have reached a consensus: it is the period when national authorities have accepted the NGOs' demands. As experts, the NGOs are involved in developing a national gender-sensitive policy and a strategy for implementing it. After this phase follows the norm implementation phase, where the new local gender-specific norms and mechanisms on women's human rights emerge.

### Orientation Phase

By 1992, Croatia had already ratified CEDAW. This certainly contributed to the outward image of a democratic state. However, a closer look shows that the ratification was initially just a meaningless facade. The country was ruled by the semi-authoritarian, nationalistic, and conservative HDZ party (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, Croatian Democratic Union). The government marginalized the question of gender equality as well as the demands and principles of the CEDAW. The political leadership forced the newly founded state of Croatia into an ethnic and national exclusivity in which a woman's role was understood as being a mother and wife. Primarily, a woman should be aware and take seriously her reproductive role in bearing children. This women's role was supported through a public campaign initiated by the government and the Catholic Church.<sup>20</sup> 'Mother', 'wife', and 'nurturer' were symbols of what it was to be a 'good' Croatian woman. In contrast, the image of a 'bad' woman was also created: this was a woman who rejected nationalistic politics, supported democratic and feminist values, and fought gender-based violence. It was a woman who wanted to involve herself in political and social life. Sexism and discrimination towards these women was tolerated, even encouraged. Even female politicians were not spared. In a parliamentary debate in 1997, Vice Vukojević, a former member of the Croatian parliament and member of the then ruling party HDZ, insulted his liberal parliamentary colleague Đurđa Adlešić with the statement, "Talk less, give birth to more children!" (*'Više radaj,*

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<sup>20</sup> Vesna Kesić, Gender and Ethnic Identities in Transition, in: Rada Iveković / Julie Mostov, eds, *From Gender to Nation*, Ravenna 2002, 63-80, 65.

*manje pričaj!').*<sup>21</sup> Gender stereotypes and sexist insults against female politicians, mainly from the opposition parties, occurred daily and were part of the political culture in Croatia. Jadranka Kosor, who was a member of the ruling party at that time and later the Croatian prime minister, remembers:

'I was a member of a very conservative and male-dominated party [...]. It's been a long time since a parliamentarian, Vesna Pusić, was insulted during the parliamentary debate. I have put myself behind her. After that I was asked by my colleagues from the HDZ [the former ruling party, J.R.-G.], why I defended the political opponent. I replied that I was not defending Vesna Pusić, but simply deplore sexist insults against female politicians. In the end, the same thing could happen to me tomorrow. My colleague replied: "That will not happen to you if you behave properly!" He made sure I understood my place in politics.'<sup>22</sup>

Hence it is hardly surprising that Croatian women's NGOs have had few allies among decision makers. Female politicians were not able to sufficiently address gender discrimination or the marginalization of women and their interests. Therefore, when there are issues that are beyond the scope and reach of the government or international aid, the NGOs who can address and solve such marginalized problems are needed.

Croatian women's NGOs had already been set up as norm advocates for women's human rights during the war, when they established the first rehabilitation centres offering mainly therapeutic and humanitarian aid for traumatized women from Croatian and Bosnian conflict areas.<sup>23</sup> Since there was already an autonomous women's movement in Yugoslavia, the women from those Yugoslav initiatives founded the first feminist NGOs. Those organizations were also part of the cross-border antiwar campaign. The Croatian feminist women's NGOs had much to do during the orientation phase of the early 1990s. Violence against women was widespread, viewed as a private matter and therefore accepted as such.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the political will was not there to enforce gender equality policy at the national level. The number of women in parliament was very low during the 1990s: in 1992, only 5.1% of the members of the Croatian parliament were women.<sup>25</sup> Women's organizations only had a few allies among the

<sup>21</sup> Zvonimir Krstulović, *Divljaci u Saboru. Naše psovke od konja do alpskog četnika*, *Jutarnji List*, 28 August 2010, <http://www.jutarnji.hr/nase-psovke-od-konja-do-alpskog-cetnika-/881363/>.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with the former Prime Minister, Jadranka Kosor, Zagreb, 28 August 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Marijana Grašak, *Frauenbewegung in Kriegs- und Krisengebieten. Kroatien, Bosnien und Herzegowina*, in: Marijana Grašak et al., eds, *Frauen und Frauenorganisationen im Widerstand in Kroatien, Bosnien und Serbien*, Frankfurt/M. 2007, 115-127, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia.

<sup>25</sup> Croatian Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in Croatia 2012*, 55, [http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv\\_Eng/menandwomen/men\\_and\\_women\\_2012.pdf](http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/menandwomen/men_and_women_2012.pdf).



decision makers. Moreover, the state budget refused to support anti-nationalist women's NGOs, who had to depend, instead, on foreign donors.

From 1992, many women's organizations and initiatives started forming in many Croatian cities. In the early years, they offered therapeutic and humanitarian assistance for traumatized refugee women from Croatia's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's war zones. However, they were also attempting to influence political decision-making.<sup>26</sup> As norm advocates or norm entrepreneurs—as defined by Finnemore and Sikkink—Croatian women's NGOs advocated for gender equality and a gender equitable state. Subsequently, women's NGOs referred to international standards (e.g. CEDAW) and increasingly networked nationally as well as internationally. To report on the women's human rights situation, they cooperated with international allies and participated in international human rights conferences.<sup>27</sup> Similar to the boomerang effect<sup>28</sup> described by Keck and Sikkink, Croatian women's NGOs operated as norm advocates to persuade national decision makers to comply with international norms as well as set local gender-specific norms and instruments. To increase pressure from 'above', the women's NGOs also asked international allies for support. To ensure international organizations and Western countries were given a real picture of the problems in Croatia, they also reported on Croatia's non-compliance with international norms and standards as well as on gender-based violence.<sup>29</sup> At the Global Tribunal in 1993, an NGO conference parallel to the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the Centre for Women's War Victims from Zagreb demanded the international community stop the war, close the concentration camps, condemn war criminals, recognize war rape as a war crime, and ensure asylum for women persecuted because of their gender.<sup>30</sup> As norm advocates, Croatian women's NGOs were working with a double strategy. First, they made the international community aware of Croatia's not complying with international gender specific norms and standards. Second, they used these norms and standards for gender equality to sensitize their allies and increase pressure on national decision makers.

Although Croatian NGOs knew that it was important to provide women with psychological and humanitarian support, they also realized they would have to become more politically and publicly involved to create institutional and

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<sup>26</sup> Grašak, *Frauenbewegung in Kriegs- und Krisengebieten*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Bunch / Niamh Reilly, *Demanding Accountability. The Global Campaign and Vienna Tribunal for Women's Human Rights*, New York 1994, 38-40.

<sup>28</sup> Keck / Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*; Risse / Ropp / Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights*.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia; interview with the head of the Center for Women's Studies Zagreb, Rada Borić, Zagreb, 27 August 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Bunch / Reilly, *Demanding Accountability*, 38-40.



structural change. Croatian decision makers needed to change their attitude towards gender equality policy. Having realized that, women's NGOs started addressing those demands and problems more vocally. The agenda-setting phase had begun.

### Agenda-Setting Phase

Croatia's gender equality policy began after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. In order to officially meet the demands of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Croatian government established the Commission for Equality (*Povjerenstvo za pitanja jednakosti*) in 1996. Women's organizations first criticized the name. Equality for whom? By purposely not equating gender equality between men and women, the government avoided the clear meaning of this institutional mechanism, namely to improve women's human rights and achieve gender equality. The concept of gender equality is not even mentioned in its name. The women's NGOs insisted on using a clearer name, such as the Commission for Gender Equality. Second, the committee was chaired by a woman who had never been involved or interested in gender equality. Thus the commission remained an empty shell, serving only to fulfil the minimum requirements of the international community and the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>31</sup> Croatian women's NGOs sought partnerships and cooperation with various ministries who supported fulfilling the CEDAW requirements. Since the local legislation to protect women's human rights was not in place, CEDAW was one of the most important instruments used by women's NGOs to influence government policy. Helped by Council of Europe experts and women's NGOs, the commission drafted the first national gender equality strategy for 1997-2000, which the government finally adopted in 1997.<sup>32</sup> For the first time, women's organizations were directly involved in the commission. Although the commission included a number of national politics issues, such as women's human rights, violence against women, institutional mechanisms for the requirement of equality, women in decision-making processes and positions, women and conflict, women's organizations were not satisfied with the work done for the commission; the government took seriously neither this commission nor the adopted national gender equality strategy for 1997-2000. In addition, the government still refused to cooperate with women's NGOs.<sup>33</sup> In fact, it just paid lip service to the implementation of international women's

<sup>31</sup> Vesna Kesić, *Feminizam i država*, Zagreb 2007, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with the coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI; Jasminka Dedić, *Issue Histories Croatia. Series of Timelines of Policy Debates*, Institute for Human Sciences (IMW), QUING Project, Vienna 2007, [http://www.quing.eu/files/results/ih\\_croatia.pdf](http://www.quing.eu/files/results/ih_croatia.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Dubljević, *Ženska politika za vrijeme i nakon Tuđmana*, 32-33.

human rights standards codified in the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW into the local policy.

Women's NGOs continued to criticize—both at home and abroad—the government's gender equality policy. At home, they demanded the institutionalization of gender equality policies. Women's voices were growing louder thanks to two national networks, the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition (*Ženska ad hoc koalicija*)—which was first formed to monitor and influence parliamentary elections in 1995—and the Women's Network of Croatia.<sup>34</sup> Members of the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition legitimized their demands and actions with the final documents of the Vienna Human Rights Conference.<sup>35</sup> In 1997 and again in 1999, the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition was launched once more to influence the election. In this coalition, women's NGOs organized diverse events and street actions. They distributed copies of international human rights treaties signed and ratified by the government, demanding they be fully incorporated into national policies.<sup>36</sup>

The Women's Ad Hoc Coalition can be seen first as an organizational platform.<sup>37</sup> Croatian women's NGOs used it as a wide and visible forum for their activities as norm advocates. They used this platform both to pressure the local government to adopt new gender specific norms and standards and fully implement CEDAW, and to make international actors aware of women's rights in Croatia and obtain their support. The 'ad hoc' pre-election actions of the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition were so successful that the women's organizations decided to found the Women's Network of Croatia (*Ženska mreža Hrvatske*) in 1996. The goal was to continue to influence government and also stay visible as a strong network. The Women's Network of Croatia acts as a feminist platform for achieving common goals. It pushes for the participation of women in politics and political decision-making; the realization of the right for women to education, labour, income, and full employment; the prevention of violence against women; and a politics of equality and tolerance.<sup>38</sup> The network unites women's NGOs, which have recognized the economic and political discrimination of women. It criticizes patriarchal structures and opposes all forms of gender discrimination.<sup>39</sup> The women's organizations meet once or twice a year to plan common actions and campaigns, as well as discuss current issues. In the late 1990s, mainly women from the then opposition liberal and social

<sup>34</sup> Kesić, *Feminizam i država*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Dubljević, *Ženska politika za vrijeme i nakon Tuđmana*; Dedić, *Issue Histories Croatia*.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia.

<sup>37</sup> Finnemore / Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*.

<sup>38</sup> Women's Network Croatia, *Political Platform of Women's Network Croatia*, [http://www.zenska-mreza.hr/platform\\_eng.htm](http://www.zenska-mreza.hr/platform_eng.htm).

<sup>39</sup> Women's Network Croatia.

democratic parties exchanged and planned joint actions with women's NGOs. The influence of the international community, which was mainly socialized by women's NGOs, became stronger, and the political parties—first the social-liberal and, later, even the conservative ones—prioritized gender equality. Women's organizations organized workshops and seminars for women from political parties.<sup>40</sup> With the woman election platform (*Ženska izborna platforma*) of the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition, Croatian norm advocates referred to CEDAW and the obligations Croatia became subject to with its ratification, namely to adopt local women's rights norms that guarantee gender equality. These rules had to be implemented.<sup>41</sup>

The year 1999 can be called a lobbying highlight for Croatian women's organizations. According to Finnemore and Sikkink's norm life cycle, the tipping point was reached at this time. The tipping point is achieved after norm advocates have persuaded a critical mass of states to adopt new norms or when one third of the states adopts the new norm.<sup>42</sup> This model can be applied to the local level in the late 1990s, when Croatian women's organizations were using the Women's Network Croatia and the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition as organizational platforms to advocate for new local norms. Furthermore, they also worked together with international allies, which supported their campaigns to reach parties crucial for adopting the norm. After the women's organizations had successfully reached the tipping point, they started a new norm dynamic. Other actors—in this case, also the ruling party HDZ—accepted the demand of women's organizations to deal with gender issues:

'The NGO campaign was conducted throughout the year 1999. And in the end everyone was willing to talk to us about our demands. Even women from HDZ agreed that 7% of women in parliament is not enough to enforce an adequate gender equality policy.'<sup>43</sup>

Croatian women's organizations were the engine of gender equality policy in the 1990s. They were very vocal, critical, and demanding:

'They [the women's organizations J.R.-G.] were the most courageous critics of the bad aspects of former government policy. They did not only advocate for the equality of men and women in the society, but also for much more. They stood for democratic values in general.'<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Dubljević, *Ženska politika za vrijeme i nakon Tuđmana*; Kesić, *Feminizam i država*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> *Ženska ad hoc koalicija, Frauenwahlplattform (Ženska izborna platforma) 1999*, *Ženska grupa Lošinj* (Archive).

<sup>42</sup> Finnemore / Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, 901.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with the Deputy Ombudsman for Gender Equality, Goran Selanec, Office of the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb, 26 August 2013.

The campaigns and projects of Croatian women's NGOs were financially and logistically supported by international foundations like the Swedish Kvinna till Kvinna.<sup>45</sup> Andrea Špehar's<sup>46</sup> case study on women's movements in Croatia distinguishes between two major groups of donors: those that exclusively support women's projects (e.g. Kvinna till Kvinna, MamaCash, the Global Fund for Women, and UNIFEM/UN Women) and those that support women's NGOs within some larger framework of support for civil society and NGO development (e.g. USAID, the Open Society Institute, the European Commission, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, and various embassies). Because they understood the mission of local NGOs and the importance of fostering women's rights activism, those that exclusively supported women's projects were particularly key for women's NGOs. Kvinna till Kvinna collaborated exclusively with women's organizations and supported their work to promote women's rights and peace.

Another meaningful kind of assistance for local women's activists was non-material support. Croatian women's NGOs and their activists honed their skills through seminars, workshops, and international conferences.

### Policy-Creation Phase

This is the shortest phase during the process of norm implementation. Because the government and women's groups have agreed that women's human rights need to be implemented, it proceeds generally without difficulty. It is the period when the women's NGOs are involved in developing a national gender-sensitive policy and its implementation strategy. In this phase, the government starts to work with women's NGOs and include them in policy planning. The government is trying to avoid conflict with women's NGOs.<sup>47</sup>

An important factor for implementing and enforcing women's human rights norms is the degree of NGO activism. A good example here are the activities of the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition in 1999. Norm advocates used the coalition as a platform for common activities to involve a wide range of ordinary people, public officials, and decision makers, and motivate them for democratic change. Throughout 1999, very committed activists worked countrywide to mobilize the electorate. Women's activists travelled around the country talking to ordinary people about the importance of voting and of having more women in decision-making.<sup>48</sup> They also pushed for women's issues to be included in the programmes of political parties, for female candidates to be nominated on

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with the head of Center for Women's Studies Zagreb.

<sup>46</sup> Špehar, *How Women's Movements Matter*.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with the coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with the coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI.

party lists, and for there to be a change in government.<sup>49</sup> Because they were part of a big national campaign, Voice '99 (*Glas '99*),<sup>50</sup> for free and fair elections, the women's NGOs were ideologically supported by the women's section of Croatia's major trade union and other forces of civil society.<sup>51</sup> As seen in the election results of 2000, the percentage of women representatives increased from 7.1% to 21.9%.<sup>52</sup> Croatian women's NGOs contributed enormously to this success. However, it would not have been possible without the support of international allies and some female Croatian politicians.<sup>53</sup>

The year 2000 was a year of political change in Croatia, leading eventually to the institutionalization of women's human rights in general as well as to a democratic breakthrough. After ten years of one-party rule, the conservative party HDZ lost the elections and was replaced by a social-liberal coalition. The new government has understood the message of Croatian society and women's NGOs: 'You can lose the election.' Due to the activities of women's NGOs, gender mainstreaming as a norm gained more and more significance as the equality between men and women instrumentally found its way into the overall policy. Moreover, women's NGOs participated in various government working groups in planning and preparing the national gender equality policy, such as in drafting the first Gender Equality Act:

'They [the representatives of the government, J.R.-G.] were very cooperative. They continually asked us [the representative of women's NGOs, J.R.-G.] whether we agree with their policies and plans on gender issues.'<sup>54</sup>

After the 2000 parliamentary elections, the Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality was established. The Commission for Equality's name was also changed, to the Commission for Gender Equality, as demanded by women's NGOs. This had also been the CEDAW Committee's recommendation in 1998,

<sup>49</sup> Jill A. Irvine, From Civil Society to Civil Servants. Women's Organizations and Critical Elections in Croatia, *Politics and Gender* 3, no. 1 (2007), 7-32, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X07070055>.

<sup>50</sup> *Glas '99* was a countrywide coalition of 148 NGOs (human rights groups, women's organizations, student organizations and environmental organizations) standing for democratic change and free and fair elections, Špehar, How Women's Movements Matter; Human Rights Watch, Croatia's Democracy Deficit: A Pre-Electoral Assessment, 1 December 1999, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a8490.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Špehar, How Women's Movements Matter; Human Rights Watch, Croatia's Democracy; interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia.

<sup>52</sup> Croatian Bureau of Statistics, Women and Men in Croatia 2012; Irvine, From Civil Society to Civil Servants.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with the head of the Center for Women's Studies Zagreb; interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia; interview with coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with the coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI.

when the first country report on the implementation of the CEDAW had been discussed. Hence the CEDAW Committee was not satisfied with the governmental obligations to implement the convention at the national level.<sup>55</sup> The example of Croatia shows how international norms influence local policies and domestic actors, even when international norms do not intervene with domestic ones.

### Norm Implementation Phase

The norm implementation phase takes place when a gender-sensitive policy is developed and new local gender-specific norms and mechanisms on women's human rights emerge. The first Gender Equality Act was passed in Croatia in September 2003, leading to the establishment of further gender equality mechanisms. In October 2003, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality was established and, in 2004, the Government Office for Gender Equality. One interviewee describes how powerful the Croatian Women's Network had become. Women's NGOs had not only promoted the implementation of institutional gender equality; they had also influenced the new government's human resources policy. The leading positions of the new gender equality institutions were held by women, which were proposed to the government and parliament by the women's NGOs.<sup>56</sup> In 2003 the parliament passed its first law on protection against domestic violence. This law was one of the first of its kind in the whole Balkan region to condemn domestic violence.<sup>57</sup>

The government has taken a number of measures to promote gender equality—such as passing the law on Protection against Domestic Violence, passing the Gender Equality Law, and setting up other gender equality institutions at the local, regional, and national level—and has followed its obligations under the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW. Nevertheless, both civil society actors and political actors have complained that the institutionalization of gender equality policy has not led to the expected results.<sup>58</sup> Despite this criticism, more and more women are taking advantage of the new protection laws put in place:

'It has changed a lot in recent years. If you call the police for domestic violence today, the perpetrator would be arrested immediately and brought before a judge the next day.'<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Kesić, *Feminizam i država*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with the head of Center for Women's Studies Zagreb.

<sup>57</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina passed the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence in 2005, Macedonia in 2004, Serbia in 2005, Slovenia in 2008 and Montenegro in 2010. Cf. Jenichen, *Politische Innovation in internationalisierten Nachkriegskontexten*.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia; interview with the coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI; interview with the Deputy Ombudsman for Gender Equality; interview with the former Prime Minister.

<sup>59</sup> Ženska grupa Lošinj. Izvještaj nevladinih udruga o položaju žena.



The government's engagement around integrating the gender perspective into local and national policies and cooperating with women's NGOs is considered an example of good practice by some institutions and stakeholders.<sup>60</sup> Yet, although one of the primary goals of women's NGOs in the 1990s was to be heard and taken seriously by the government and society, Bojana Genov criticizes the new collaboration trend:

'Women's NGOs wanted a partnership with the government, what they became in the end. But this partnership means that the representatives of women's NGOs were regularly invited to attend various meetings organized by the government, to serve there as decoration and to receive small honorariums for sitting there. The most corrupt practice today is the partnership between NGOs and government institutions. Then, the NGOs have lost their status of being a critical opposition which asks the right questions.'<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, there are tensions and conflicts between women's NGOs about who should be a part of diverse governmental working groups, or who is possibly privileged by the national donors, because many NGOs now receive significant government funding.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusions

In this article, I have addressed how Croatian women's NGOs have contributed to gender equality policy developments in Croatia and what instruments and strategies they have used to enforce this change. A number of conclusions about Croatian women's NGOs can be drawn from the empirical evidence of this study. First, they have used international women's human rights instruments—such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action—to formulate their goals, accomplish change, and legitimize their actions towards national policymakers and a patriarchal society. Second, they have worked with international allies, receiving from them essential financial and non-material support. Third, they have acted as a strong national network, powerful enough both to exert political pressure on local and national decision makers, and to sensitize international actors about the government's non-compliance with women's human rights norms. Fourth, women's organizations have received support from some female politicians.

This article has shown the instruments and strategies that these NGOs have used to formulate, initiate, and adopt innovative gender equality policy. As

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with the former Prime Minister.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with the former coordinator of the Women's Network Croatia; interview with the coordinator of the Women's NGO CESI.

the strongest advocates of women's human rights, they have used a double strategy to call attention to gender-based discrimination and the Croatian government's failure to implement international women's human rights norms. However, three questions for further research arise from recent developments in women's rights in Croatia: first, have these new local gender norms and standards reached local women, and how can we measure that? Second, how can the feminist perspective, which must remain critical of the government's efforts to implement new norms and standards (and monitor those efforts), be balanced with the need to build bridges with government officials working on gender issues? And third, could it be that the feminist movement also blocks the implementation of women's human right norms in transitional societies?

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