

## **“This Had To Be Done By Mothers Alone:” Research Notes on the Expansion of Women’s Agency During the Croatian Homeland War**

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### **Abstract**

*In the years prior to, during, and after the Croatian Homeland War (1991-95), thousands of women answered the call to serve their nation. This research note offers a preliminary exploration of their stories. Initial discoveries show that Croatian women created pre-war networks attempting to prevent war, defied restrictive gender norms by serving in the military during the war, and utilized their wartime service to enhance women’s political representation after having endured unspeakable wartime atrocities. Emphasizing their pivotal roles in reshaping societal norms amidst conflict, initial research navigates through findings that show Croatian women strengthening their agency through the organization of pre-war protests and military service, and the political leverage of social networks and military service to enhance their status during postwar reconstruction.*

**Keywords:** Women’s history, agency, activism, human rights, Croatian Homeland War

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## Résumé

*Dans les années avant, pendant et après la guerre pour la patrie croate, des milliers de femmes ont répondu à l'appel pour servir leur nation. Cette note de recherche propose une exploration préliminaire de leurs histoires. Les premières découvertes montrent que dans la période d'avant-guerre, les femmes croates ont créé des réseaux pour tenter de prévenir la guerre ; qu'elles ont défié les normes restrictives en matière de genre en servant dans l'armée pendant la guerre ; et qu'après avoir enduré des atrocités indescriptibles pendant la guerre, elles ont utilisé leur service en temps de guerre pour améliorer la représentation politique des femmes. Soulignant leur rôle central dans la refonte des normes sociétales en période de conflit, les premières recherches parcourent des résultats qui montrent que les femmes croates ont renforcé leur capacité d'action (« agentivité ») pour améliorer leur statut pendant la reconstruction d'après-guerre en organisant des manifestations avant la guerre, en servant dans les forces armées et en utilisant l'influence politique découlant de leurs réseaux sociaux et de leur service militaire.*

**Mots clés :** Histoire des femmes, agentivité, activisme, droits humains, guerre d'indépendance croate

## Introduction

The study of women in warfare is one that overwhelmingly depicts them as passive beings— primarily victims of violence—as opposed to active participants. This reactionary narrative disregards their contributions while undermining the transformational significance warfare often holds for women. Initial research suggests that by reflecting on the experiences of women during the Croatian War of Independence, one can understand and appreciate how women capitalize upon the social expanse created by war to shatter restrictive gender roles and increase political representation.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I aim to theorize how warfare often acts as a fundamental catalyst of women's social movements, in this case the expansion of women's rights in postwar Croatia.

To do so, I first establish a basis of comparison that can be used to analyze change over time. This variable—the share of women in Croatia's pre- vs. post-war Parliament—does not tell the story of *all* women, however. As such, this paper considers a sociological baseline as well, and one that fits disparate agencies between rural and urban women. Following the establishment of a theoretical framework, the paper will shift its attention to the prewar environment of Yugoslavia to contextualize the Homeland War and examine how women formed, led, and participated in pre-war protests. The expansion of female agency did not occur in a vacuum; Croatian women did not, and arguably could

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<sup>1</sup> Croatsians more commonly refer to their war of independence as the Homeland War (1991-1995).

not spontaneously decide to protest the status-quo. Instead, they took advantage of pre-war protests to blur the lines between their ‘traditional’ gender roles as mothers and action as political agents—action that would otherwise have been considered a masculine endeavor. This blurring of gender roles continued into the war as some women took on ‘traditional’ roles such as nursing, maintaining the home front, tending to refugees, etc., while others fought in combat. Finally, this paper considers the impact that women’s service, both through protest and war, had on the expansion of women’s rights in the postwar republic of Croatia. In doing so, I hypothesize that women utilized their service to advocate for increased representation all while overcoming traditional, restrictive gender norms.

As previously stated, the first step is to establish a basis of comparison—one that objectively demonstrates the increase in women’s political representation while acknowledging, recognizing, and respecting the markedly different experiences of urban and rural women. This basis, although nuanced, still revolves around the question of citizenship and the rights or liberties afforded to women. Therefore, the first part of this comparison—the political—is best illustrated by the level of parliamentary representation women achieved and have maintained. Recent work in political science has tracked the percentage of seats women have held in the Croatian Parliament since its first free election in 1990. In the 1990 election, women composed 4.6% of the Parliament despite accounting for 51.5% of the country’s population as per the World Bank’s estimates.<sup>2</sup> During the Homeland War, the percentage of women in Parliament climbed slightly to 5.8% and then, in the post-war years, steadily until reaching 21.9% in 2000.<sup>3</sup> What accounts for this significant increase in representation? I argue that it was primarily due to women taking advantage of the social expanse created by their pre-war protests and eventual service in the Homeland War. At first, Croatian women blurred the divided, gendered line between motherhood and the political sphere through their anti-war protests. Later, when their anti-war protests had proven to be futile and the war began, women shifted their focus to supporting the Croatian military in both traditional manners, by working in support roles like nursing, and nontraditionally, by serving openly as soldiers. In these roles, women contributed significantly to the war effort, personally, economically, and politically. Finally, once Croatia succeeded in gaining international recognition and its independence, women did not simply return to their quiet lives in the domestic world. Instead, they leveraged their service, demanding increased representation in the country *they* fought to create.

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank, *Population, Female (% of Total Population) – Croatia*, 2019, Accessed 29 May 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?end=2020&locations=HR&start=1989&view=chart>

<sup>3</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%) - Croatia*, Accessed 28 May 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=HR>.

Still, this process is not as straightforward as one may assume, especially for women who resided in the rural, often overwhelmingly traditional countryside. While both groups of women technically had the same rights—the Yugoslav Constitution of 1946 made no distinction between geographic location when it declared that “women have equal rights with men in all fields of state, economic and social-political life”—this didn’t pan out in reality.<sup>4</sup> Instead, as scholars like Mirjana Morokvasic have pointed out, the interpersonal relationships of men and women did not change.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Lynette Šikić-Mićanović focuses on this trend, specifically considering the perspectives of rural women. She argues that these women were effectively denied the same political and social opportunities as men since they had access to little decision-making capital, often because of the traditional gender beliefs that pervaded these communities.<sup>6</sup> Šikić-Mićanović illustrates this claim by pointing out that while “‘going to church’ is one of the few public/social activities that exist and are suitable for women in these villages,” their role within the church mirrors that of their domestic role.<sup>7</sup> The disparity of agency between rural and urban Croatian women is also demonstrated through the work of other researchers, like Dr. Ana Miškowska Kajevska, who focuses on urban women. Her research on feminist Croatian NGOs during the 1990s necessarily focuses on urban centers like Zagreb; the countryside did not have anywhere near the same level, if any, of feminist organization.<sup>8</sup>

The apparent inequality between rural and urban women suggests the need for two distinct baselines. The aforementioned measure of political representation certainly works for urban women, who had access to the political world for decades (that would only increase following the Homeland War). Rural women, however, tended to be too far removed to experience the benefits of political representation. Therefore, the starting point of rural women was different; their contributions during the war revolved around shattering restrictive gender norms while, afterwards, their urban sisters leveraged service for increased for governmental representation.

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<sup>4</sup> Yugoslavia, *Constitution of the Federal Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia* (Embassy of the Federal Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia, 1946), 12, [https://heinonline-org.jerome.stjohns.edu/HOL/Page?collection=cow&handle=hein.cow/cyugo0001&id=12&men\\_tab=srchresults#](https://heinonline-org.jerome.stjohns.edu/HOL/Page?collection=cow&handle=hein.cow/cyugo0001&id=12&men_tab=srchresults#). See also Maja Mikula, “Embrace or Resist: Women and Collective Identification in Croatia and Former Yugoslavia since WWII,” in *Women, Activism and Social Change*, ed. Maja Mikula (Routledge, 2009), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Mirjana Morokvasic, “Institutionalised Equality and Women’s Conditions in Yugoslavia,” *Equal Opportunities International* 2, no. 4 (January 1, 1983): 9–17, <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb010386>.

<sup>6</sup> Lynette Šikić-Mićanović, “Women’s Contribution to Rural Development in Croatia: Roles, Participation and Obstacles,” *Eastern European Countryside* 15, no. 2009 (2010): 75, <https://doi.org/doi:10.2478/v10130-009-0005-5>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-3.

<sup>8</sup> Ana Miskovska Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War*, Gender and Comparative Politics 1 (New York and London: Routledge, 2017). See also Šikić-Mićanović, 83.

With baselines having been established, attention shifts to the contextual background of the independence movement. Dr. Ante Cuvalo, a historian of contemporary Croatia, authored a monograph appropriately titled *The Croatian National Movement* that explores the movement's origins during the 1960s, providing the necessary context for this paper. While he establishes the ethnic origin of Croats and other background information, the majority of the work necessarily focuses on the abuses Croatia faced while it was a part of Yugoslavia.<sup>9</sup> The main conflict revolved around Yugoslavia's attempts at creating a coherent nation composed of a single identity, that of a Yugoslav as opposed to a Croat, Serb, etc. President Josip Broz Tito made this abundantly clear when he declared "if we want to create a socialist culture, we must also have a common program. It must be Yugoslav. Not every republic and every nationality."<sup>10</sup> This mission went on for decades until Tito's death in 1980 and to a lesser extent in the years leading up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Without the Soviet Union backing Yugoslavia any longer, and due to turmoil within the Yugoslav federation itself, Croats held their first free, multi-party elections for the reestablished Croatian Parliament in 1990. Some of the Parliament's first acts included revising the Croatian Constitution, amending Articles 11 and 12 to remove socialist symbols from the flag and reinstate Croatian as the official language.<sup>11</sup> Later, in May of 1991, Croatia held a referendum for independence in which 83.5% of the country voted, and of that, 93.2% of Croats voted for independence from Yugoslavia.<sup>12</sup> On 25 June 1991, Croatia declared independence but, after being advised to do so by other members of the European community, held it off for a three-month moratorium, as a part of the Brijuni Agreement, an attempt at postponing the cession of Croatia and Slovenia. Despite this, fighting only intensified and on 8 October Croatia broke away from Yugoslavia completely, thus formally beginning the Homeland War.

Although Cuvalo provides an excellent political analysis of the evolving conflict, his work only contained a few sparse details regarding the role of women in the entire process. While women were certainly a political minority (only composing 5.8% of the Parliament, as previously mentioned), their perspective went largely unheard; that is until one woman went back, years after the Homeland War, to document their points of view. This woman —Marija Sliskovic— originally worked as a designer after graduating from the University of Zagreb several years prior to the outbreak of the war. During the conflict, she served alongside hundreds of other women who supported the effort by sewing clothing,

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<sup>9</sup> Ante Cuvalo, *The Croatian National Movement* (New York: East European Monographs, 1990), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Griffith, W.E. *Communism in Europe: Continuity, Change, and the Sino-Soviet Dispute*. Elsevier Science, 2013. (Originally *Politika*, February 14, 1963).

<sup>11</sup> Croatia, *Croatia's Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2013* (The Constitute Project, August 26, 2021), 7, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Croatia\\_2013.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Croatia_2013.pdf?lang=en).

<sup>12</sup> Croatian Parliament, *19 May - Croatian Independence Referendum*, n.d. Accessed 26 April 2024; <https://www.sabor.hr/en/about-parliament/history/important-dates/19-may-croatian-independence-referendum>

providing supplies, and caring for the displaced or wounded. Following the conflict though, in 2005 she began contacting women to document their version of events. These interviews were eventually published in an eight-volume series, *Women in the Homeland War*. In its introduction, Sliskovic comments that:

The following truthful testimonies of women about their experience, about their endeavors to stop the war, about the false endangerment of the Serb minority, about the unarmed defenders, about the expulsion from their homes are written down for the coming generations. Each and every one of them wrote down without hate, her own memories, emotions, pains, and truths about the horrifying war in Croatia at the end of the twentieth century, about the time when all of us defended our own homes and the Homeland.<sup>13</sup>

Thankfully, Sliskovic's work provides this paper with the opportunity to explore the direct perspectives of Croatian women as opposed to relying on other individuals to retell their stories accurately. Moreover, her interviews act as the foundation for future research on this topic, as well as being a mainstay of ever-expanding field of women's history in Croatia.<sup>14</sup>

### **Her Pre-War Protests**

What were women doing in the lead up to Croatia declaring its independence from Yugoslavia? First and foremost, they were concerned about the safety of their sons. In former-Yugoslavia, men were conscripted for twelve months of mandatory military service. With the seemingly inevitable outbreak of war, this proved to be especially concerning for the mothers of young men who had just begun their service and could have been forced to fight against their own families if Croatia were to secede. In response to these concerns, women came together to protest against the mandatory conscription and to argue for the release of their sons. Josipa Milas Matutinović, the mother of two sons in the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), drafted a petition that read:

As the fateful day of 19 January approaches, we, the mothers of conscripts in units of the Yugoslav People's Army, appeal to you to spare the innocent lives of our sons! In the name of humanity, do not allow our sons' blood to be shed! In the name of peace, do not force our sons to fire on their brothers, their sisters, their parents, their friends! In the name of freedom, do not try to

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<sup>13</sup> Marija Sliskovic, ed., *Women in the Homeland War*, vol. 8 (Zagreb: Zene U Domovinskom Ratu, 2010), 10.

<sup>14</sup> This research note owes a huge debt of gratitude to Marija Sliskovic. She recognized the importance of these women's stories and ensured they were accurately captured and preserved. Moreover, she continues to advocate for the rights of women in Croatia by serving as the president of the Women in the Homeland War association.

solve political problems over the dead bodies of our sons! Gather your strength for dialogue and reason! Listen to your conscience and think of our innocent young sons and yours!<sup>15</sup>

In the following days, this petition would be signed by over 67,000 individuals across Zagreb and hand delivered to a member of the Yugoslav Presidency, Mr. Stejepan Mesić.<sup>16</sup> Matutinović's petition speaks volumes to the influence of the women's protest, both in terms of their reputation amongst Croats and ability to reach a member of the Yugoslav Presidency.<sup>17</sup> While these petitions had mixed results, occasionally resulting in the release of some individuals from military conscription—like one of Matutinović's sons—they by no means proved to be effective across the board.

In light of that, Matutinović and other women began a more proactive campaign to liberate their sons from the JNA's barracks. She describes the expansive network mothers formed to facilitate these abductions, stating that "we were diligently snatching young men, one by one, from the barracks" and even bragged that "at some points we even snatched whole units from the jaws of that army!"<sup>18</sup> While Matutinović's actions were certainly impressive, some scholars would argue that she was simply acting out of dedication to family, not to deliberately expand her agency. When considered on a personal level these arguments may have merit, but Matutinović's network was anything but limited to her own family. Instead, much like the petitions, the network demonstrated the agency and political prowess of women working together towards a single goal; it created a channel in which they could act politically while simultaneously creating a coherent identity for Croatian women. Matutinović herself describes the moment her understanding of this occurred: she wrote that "we thought if we snatched all the young men from the army, the army would totally implode and thus we could stop the violence."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the actions of Matutinović and other women were not simply those of individuals attempting to protect their own families. Instead, the protests leading up to the outbreak of the war offered women a unique opportunity, one in which they kept a foot in the domestic world through their devotion to family but also placed the other firmly in the political as they sought to stop the war. This is only reinforced when one considers the international reach of Matutinović's and other women's protests.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>17</sup> The Yugoslav Presidency was the ultimate governing body of the federation. It was composed of nine members, each elected by their country's parliament, Mr. Mesić being Croatia's representative and the Vice Presidency of the Presidency at the time.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> While Matutinović's contributions have been preserved by Marija Sliskovic, Matutinović has also been the topic of several other news articles. Her friend, V. Krčmar, wrote of her legacy following Matutinović's recent passing on 3 December 2021. See V. Krčmar, "In Memoriam – Višnja Milas Matutinović," *Portal of the Croatian Cultural Council*, December 8, 2021. Accessed 28 May 2022, <https://www.hkv.hr/izdvojeno/vai-prilozi/ostalo/prilozi-graana/38769-v-kremar-in-memoriam-visnja->

Following the inaction of the Yugoslav government after receiving petitions that called for the liberation of conscripts, activist Croatian women decided to march on Belgrade. This mission was spearheaded by Marija Horvat, another mother who had sons in the JNA. Her entry in Sliskovic's book is riddled with instances of fear and anxiety due to not knowing whether her son would be deployed, especially after a poignant exchange with her husband. She recalls this conversation, in which, after their morning coffee, her husband went out but soon returned and declared that he had joined the Croatian Homeland Guards. In horror and anger she exclaimed, "Which Guards?! What? Are you going to shoot at your sons, are they going to shoot at you?!"<sup>21</sup> While one can only imagine how this conversation ended for her husband, their exchange illustrates the stark reality of what war would entail. This realization certainly drove Horvat, and other mothers, to renew their efforts in liberating conscripts. As the petitions did not seem to work, Horvat organized a rally where she "took the microphone and said, 'we can write to them, we can reason with them as much as you want, but we must go to Belgrade!'"<sup>22</sup>

Following this declaration, the women organized twenty-six buses to take them nearly two hundred and fifty miles to Belgrade, and although they faced harassment from JNA units at the border, they eventually made their way to the Topčider Barracks Grounds. There, they began negotiations with military officials. Horvat recalled that "our intentions were not to leave before they let our children free. We spent two days and two nights in that hall...twenty-five buses of women in one hall...Women were exhausted, many fainted. We were not prepared for this; we did not any food or drink."<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately though, the women eventually had to give in and take empty assurances of their sons' safety back with them to Zagreb.

As these peaceful negotiations failed again, more women flocked to join Matutinović's network. Horvat herself recalled helping "snatch young men from the barracks" and facilitating their transportation through a local schoolteacher.<sup>24</sup> Despite these failures, the actions of Horvat and her fellow women exemplify the expansion of female agency from the traditionally domestic sphere into the public. Interestingly, Horvat mentioned that prior to leaving Zagreb on the buses to Belgrade, fathers had tried to join but she refused, stating "we said no to them; this had to be done by mothers alone."<sup>25</sup> While Horvat's decision was certainly symbolic, she demonstrated that these women did not feel a need for the assistance of their husbands. This is particularly substantial when one considers that the women faced down military officers of the country with whom they would soon be at war.

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milas-matutinovic-29-2-19.html.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 52.



Croatian women continued to advocate for peace, hoping to avoid the outbreak of war and as the shortcomings of domestic activism became obvious, they escalated their advocacy from a national to an international forum. Vera Jurčević, a woman living in Petrinja, recalls waiting in front of a department store for the women returning from Belgrade. After she learned about all of the details regarding the agonizing trip, specifically the “inhuman behavior of the Yugoslav officers towards them,” Jurčević joined the next mission to Europe.<sup>26</sup> She recalls that “we went on that mission firmly believing that the world would recognize our cry for peace and that they would stop the war raging in Croatia.”<sup>27</sup> This mission would take Jurčević and nine other women in front of the European Parliament in Brussels, where they hoped to have the opportunity to describe the horrors they, and countless other women, were facing in Croatia. There, she remembered what it felt like having been chosen to speak for the women of Croatia and reiterated the instructions given to her that day: “we were told not to be afraid of anything and that we only had to answer questions truthfully.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, she testified about how JNA tanks and soldiers had razed Petrinja and questioned the Parliament’s members, asking “how long would that beautiful Europe wait to understand that Croatia was under attack, that there was a war and that people were being killed. Why did they postpone the recognition of Croatia?”<sup>29</sup> Despite her moving testimony, no aid would come. She later returned to Zagreb and was welcomed by President Franjo Tuđman, the Minister of Defense Gojko Šušak, and the Mayor of Zagreb Boris Bužančić but only wanted to return to Petrinja. Overall, Jurčević’s mission and testimony further demonstrate that women were becoming politically active to support Croatia, and that it was being encouraged by other men and women.

### **Her Wartime Service**

Despite her involvement in pre-war protests, Jurčević’s story fades away from politics, instead focusing on her role as a non-combatant, in this case a nurse. Her experience, along with those of the vast majority of Croatian women, follows a common path, one in which women shifted their attention from peacemaking to supporting the war effort. At the same time, their devotion to Croatia inspired them to continue developing and strengthening their agency. Jurčević recalled this shift in priorities, writing that “nothing was the same anymore, we lived and we did what was the priority at a certain moment; no one asked about the schedules since between working hours and alerts there was only the first line of defense which was only several hundred meters away.”<sup>30</sup> While their agency was certainly less pronounced than it was during the protests, women still acted

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 141-42.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 142-43.

based on *their* beliefs and values, not that of their husbands, sons, or other men. Jurčević demonstrates this fact herself:

On September 13, 1991 I came off duty and stood on the road not knowing where to go. I wanted to go home, I did not want to go anywhere else and I had no transport. I started to go on foot towards Petrinja. Columns of people were leaving the town and I was walking in the opposite direction. I managed to reach my house that day, I made coffee and sat on the terrace and watched the road. I do not know what I was waiting for, what I was doing there, everything was desolate. Suddenly, out of nowhere, my neighbor Mića appeared and asked me what I was doing there, why I did not leave, could I not see what was going on! I calmly told him that I had no intention of going anywhere because this was *my* house [emphasis added].<sup>31</sup>

Regardless of the looming threat of Yugoslav artillery or tanks destroying her home, Jurčević refused to leave. While some may claim that her stubbornness was futile, Jurčević asserted that “I would have never left my house since I could neither understand nor accept that anyone had the right to drive us away from our land.”<sup>32</sup> Again, *she* was the one who decided this, not her husband or anyone else. While a difference in pronouns may not seem significant, it clearly demonstrates the growing agency of Croatian women.

Although the vast majority of Croatian women supported the war effort in traditional manners, some women chose to take up arms to defend their villages and the Homeland. While their stories are far less common than women serving in non-combatant roles, like Vera Jurčević, their heroics speak volumes to the courage and devotion Croatian women exhibited. Interestingly, their stories also provide a direct view into the gendered bias Croatian women had encountered for decades: exclusion from masculine spaces, e.g. opposition to their direct participation in combat. No Croatian is more familiar with this than Danka Dražina from Škabrnja, a young woman who sought to join one of the first units of the Croatian Guard. She recalled the thoughts going through her head during the summer of 1991:

Twenty boys from Škabrnja, known as the first Croatian policemen, were already getting prepared for the defense of the Homeland in various locations. Most of my friends without hesitation took that burden upon their shoulders. In those moments I wanted to be a man. At that time I was only making them coffee and keeping them company so as to encourage them. And then one day something broke inside me. ‘I want to take part in the defense.’<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 246.

While Dražina sought to defend her village, she was met with a simple answer, “you are crazy, stick to your classes, *you are a woman* (emphasis added).”<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, Dražina did the complete opposite of that, instead replacing her Levi jeans and books for “a secondhand camouflage uniform...and for a gun.”<sup>35</sup> Dražina again contemplated the significance of this moment, writing that:

At short notice I was holding a lethal weapon in my hands instead of books. I did not like the smell of cold steel and it took some time to realize that the lethal weapon I held in my hands had been transformed into means to help me feel safe. I hoped I would never have to use it, but I was wrong... I was a Croatian soldier.<sup>36</sup>

After completing a basic training course, Dražina was deployed as a part of a medical unit in Škabrnja. There she served alongside doctors on the frontline, often moving between homes during the artillery shelling of the village to provide first-aid to the wounded. Inevitably though, the village fell after JNA tanks and infantry followed the barrage. Dražina recalled the retreat remembering that “on that day the sky above Škabrnja was in flames and the rivers of blood were soaking the earth. [The JNA] drove hundreds of villagers from Škabrnja toward Benkovac, the crowd in front of the store in Biljane laughed and humiliated [the villagers].”<sup>37</sup> As the war progressed, Dražina’s experience only became more harrowing, having to endure frostbite during the winter, constantly bury fellow defenders and civilians, and so much more. While Dražina survived the war, she never received recognition, and therefore the privileges, associated with being a Croatian defender. When she went to the Office of Defense in Zadar, she was met with a simple but infuriating conclusion: “Madam, you are not in the computer.”<sup>38</sup> Dražina recalls what went through her mind at that moment, thinking “did one become a Croatian defender by being on the front line or by legal procedure?”<sup>39</sup>

While Dražina’s service may have not been recognized, it exemplified the opportunity provided by the war for women: the chance to disregard traditional biases that restricted women to the domestic world. In larger scheme of things, the Croats needed anyone who was willing to fight, especially as they were facing the better armed, better trained, and numerically superior troops of the JNA. Consequently, women were accepted into the Croatian Guards, taking on roles as medics and infantry, as demonstrated by Dražina’s service; women soldiers also appeared in war photos (see Figure 1).

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 1: Croatian female soldiers at the Gospic front. Photograph by Robert Belosevic, September 1991. Image courtesy of the Image of War Photography Museum.*

A lesser-known aspect of women's service during the Homeland War was the authorship of patriotic literature. This literature, primarily in the form of poems and prayers, offers the opportunity to view women from two lenses. First, on a personal level, their work often reflects heartfelt recollections of reality during the war, but, secondly, on a societal level, women wrote about their contributions to Croatia. While this volume of Sliskovic's work features numerous poems by women, one stands out in particular as it captures the personal sacrifices of women while acknowledging their service to the Croatian state.<sup>40</sup> The author, Milena Burčul Pašara, eloquently wrote:

To you woman, living in all women,  
To you, mother,  
Woman,  
Warrior,  
who instead of beds  
stretches the rags  
on the floors of deserted houses.  
Instead of light  
you ignite candle.

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<sup>40</sup> For other poems see Sliskovic, Vol. 8: 37, 129, 146, 152-53, 172, 242, 269, 310-12.

To you, guiding star of our feelings,  
the crib of our tenderness,  
eternity.  
To you,  
who with a rifle in your hand  
defend the hearth,  
connect the splinters of the heart into entity.  
To you,  
who instead of a child  
rock the Homeland in your lap.<sup>41</sup>

Pašara captures the essence of Croatian women's service as mothers, activists, and finally warriors: mothers, like Josipa Milas Matutinović and Marija Horvat, sought to save their sons from the terrible outcomes of war and activists marched on Belgrade and the European Parliament, demonstrating their agency as Croatian women to the rest of the world. Heroically, warriors, like Danka Dražina, took up arms in defense of their Homeland, often only receiving recognition in poems afterwards. What did their service earn them though? And how did the war provide women the necessary leverage to make gender equality a reality in the new Croatian republic?

### **Her Post-War Status**

Following the Homeland War, women continued to expand their agency by refocusing their attention towards gaining political power and increasing representation within the new Croatian republic. This movement is evidenced by the post-war political environment in which many female NGOs, often ones that had originally been established to support victims of the war, became strongholds of feminist action that broadly advocated for women's rights.<sup>42</sup> Still though, their movement was met with opposition; fundamentalists within the Croatian government sought to re-impose traditional restrictions on Croatian women who had stepped beyond the domestic sphere. Although Croatian women had sacrificed everything for their country during the war alongside Croatian men, Croatian culture remained an overwhelmingly conservative and religious society that tended to view women as mothers—not political agents. While their war-time service blurred the boundaries between their traditional roles in the domestic and actions in the political sphere, post-war Croatia was characterized by a gendered conflict when women would not simply return to their pre-war roles as mothers or domestic workers. What followed was a back-and-forth struggle between feminist groups and conservative actors, one in which the status of Croatian women was and remains ever-changing, mostly for good but also, at times, for the worse.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>42</sup> For a longer explanation of these NGOs and summaries of their actions, see Kajevska, 27–44.

Out of the many women's NGOs that were active during this period, I will necessarily focus on the work of *Budi aktivna. Budi emancipiran*. (Be Active. Be Emancipated; BaBe).<sup>43</sup> BaBe was established in April of 1994; its founding members had already been involved with Women's Lobby Zagreb, another feminist NGO that had been active since 1992.<sup>44</sup> In an interview from 2020, Sanja Sarnavka, who acted as BaBe's president for seventeen years, discussed the organization's impetus, pointing out that "with war... came re-patriarchization" which BaBe hoped to counteract.<sup>45</sup> To do so, BaBe first considered the status of women in Croatia, comparing their current situation with the goals outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international treaty of the United Nations to which Croatia became a signatory in 1992.<sup>46</sup> In one of its initial reports, BaBe focused on the disparities between what Croatia had agreed to by becoming a signatory of CEDAW and the reality that Croatian women faced; the authors wrote:

Unfortunately the Government of the Republic of Croatia does not display commitment to the ideals behind the progressive legal documents and treaties that it has sworn to obey. These documents often represent little more than decorative public relations pieces to convince the international community that Croatia is a liberal democracy. In the gap between law, principles and practice, women confront problems in attaining full recognition and enjoyment of all rights and freedoms to which they are entitled.<sup>47</sup>

The authors argue that the Croatian government has merely put up a façade, one that disguises the reality of women in Croatia so that the country can gain international recognition and support for its independence. They go on to directly call out the "conservative policies of the ruling party and its leaders, certain members of parliament, media, church leaders and some professional groups," accusing them of threatening "women's full participation in the various spheres of cultural, political and economic life."<sup>48</sup> Later, the authors further demonstrate this disparity by discussing a variety of

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<sup>43</sup> BaBe was, and still is, one of the most active women's NGOs in Croatia and, consequently, it has left behind one of the most accessible paper trails for international researchers. The records of other women's NGOs are housed in the Croatian National Archives in Zagreb but are unfortunately only available physically, not digitally.

<sup>44</sup> Kajevska, 39–42.

<sup>45</sup> Marcela del Portillo Cure, *A Past Gone Missing: Dealing with Contentious and Politicised Pasts Based on the Experience of Human Rights NGOs in Croatia*, Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Zagreb, 2019, 69, Accessed 26 April 2024, <https://repository.gchumanrights.org/items/7c5fcb38-1987-4c59-945d-9d4db3793cd4/full>.

<sup>46</sup> CEDAW had originally been adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 but Croatia had signed into the treaty on 9 September 1992 as a part of its efforts to gain international recognition during the Homeland War. For other treaties see [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=43&Lang=EN](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=43&Lang=EN).

<sup>47</sup> BaBe, Women's Human Rights Group, *The Status of Women in Croatia*, Accessed June 6, 2022, <http://balkansnet.org/women/babe.html#babe>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

examples in which women face discrimination, mainly in healthcare, housing, domestic violence, etc., while also addressing the mission of a lesser-known department within the government: the Ministry for Renewal's Department of Demographic Renewal.<sup>49</sup>

This department, headed by a Catholic priest named Anto Baković, was tasked with ensuring the ethnic homogeneity of Croatia and sought to do so by enshrining "MOTHERHOOD as the highest vocation and profession for women."<sup>50</sup> In other words, the department, and specifically Baković, hoped to preserve the Croatian identity by ensuring that women consistently birthed and raised enough Croatian citizens. Baković was eventually removed from his post, after protests from BaBe and other women's groups; he also drew rebuke from the Catholic Church, which stated that "he [went] too far" and that "the church can't let itself or its beliefs be used by people with racist or chauvinistic ideas."<sup>51</sup> Still, Baković persisted and founded his own organization that would promote his natalist policies, the Croatian Population Movement (CPM).

Although Baković had been ousted from the government, he still received support from leading officials like the Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman, who diverted funding to the CPM and stated that its work would divert the "extinction of the Croatian nation."<sup>52</sup> Later, in 1995, this support became even more pronounced as the Croatian Parliament adopted Baković's National Program for Demographic Renewal; this program sought to increase birthrates by, among other measures, offering women a salary and pension if they birthed four or more children.<sup>53</sup> While this sort of assistance could have been perceived as supporting women and mothers, BaBe and other women's NGOs argued otherwise in the courts and in public opinion. The late Vesna Kesic, one of the original founders of BaBe, described the program in plain terms: "basically," she wrote, "these people see women as the vehicles for their own ethnically homogenous Croatia."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, BaBe contended

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> RNS Blog Editor, "Aftermath of War: Family Planning Becomes Politically Charged Issue in Post-War Croatia," *Religion News Service* (blog), June 14, 1996, Accessed 7 June 2022, <https://religionnews.com/1996/06/14/top-story-aftermath-of-war-family-planning-becomes-politically-charged-issu/>.

<sup>52</sup> Sabrina P. Ramet, *Central and Southeast European Politics Since 1989* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 260, Accessed 7 June 2022, <https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=313331&site=ehost-live>. Also see RNS Blog Editor, "Aftermath of War: Family Planning Becomes Politically Charged Issue in Post-War Croatia."

<sup>53</sup> S. P. Ramet and D. Matic, *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education, and Media* (Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 287, Accessed 7 June 2022, [https://books.google.com/books?id=IicX\\_1DyNMUC](https://books.google.com/books?id=IicX_1DyNMUC).

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Religious News Service by their Blog Editor, "Aftermath of War: Family Planning Becomes Politically Charged Issue in Post-War Croatia." The RNS cites the 7 February 1996 edition of the Women East-West Newsletter, a publication from Association for Women in Slavic Studies. Vesna Kesic also recently passed away in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Her colleague, Dr. Elzbieta Matynia of the New School for Social Research, wrote a touching memorial that described her life-

that the Baković's plan was actually a form of "long-term" discrimination since the program would "encourage women to stay away from public life and work."<sup>55</sup>

Although BaBe's legal challenge would eventually succeed, the government's solution was to allow men to claim the status as well, although records indicate that few if any were able to claim the salary and pension.<sup>56</sup> Looking back, we can see that the Croatian government achieved its goal of promoting an ethnically homogenous Croatia while ensuring that women maintained their role as mothers and place within their homes. Despite that, BaBe's report illustrates the tenacity shown by Croatian women when confronting troubling realities; just as they fought for their country, they would have to fight against its attempts to re-establish their confinement in the domestic sphere.

The Croatian government's traditional stance regarding oppressive roles of women was also recognized by the international community, specifically the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.<sup>57</sup> In the country's initial CEDAW report, from 1995, Croatian representatives acknowledged the service of women; when discussing the impacts of the Homeland War they wrote that "women had also taken an active part in the war imposed on Croatia, both as combatants and as providers of ancillary services."<sup>58</sup> Despite that acknowledgment though, the government insisted it was not their fault that women were not participating in public life. Instead, they argued, women simply "did not always make full use of the rights guaranteed by law, particularly with regard to political involvement."<sup>59</sup> This victim-blaming did not sit well with the Committee, who later listed the government's ignorance of "indirect and structural discrimination and its impact on women" as an area of "principal concern."<sup>60</sup> Later, the Committee directly addressed the Croatia's National Program for Demographic Renewal:

The Committee is particularly concerned about the consistent emphasis placed on women's roles as mothers and caregivers in Croatian legislation pertaining to a variety of areas. While legislative provisions protecting maternity are important, the Committee is concerned that prioritizing that

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long dedication to women's rights in Croatia. See Elzbieta Matynia, "Vesna Kesic: In Memoriam," *Public Seminar* (blog), December 31, 2020, Accessed 7 June 2022, <https://publicseminar.org/essays/vesna-kesic/>.

<sup>55</sup> Ramet and Matic, 287.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> This committee was the monitoring/enforcement aspect of the CEDAW convention.

<sup>58</sup> Garcia-Prince, "Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: Fourteenth Session Summary Record of the 279th Meeting" (New York: United Nations, January 31, 1995), 3, Accessed 26 April 2024, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n95/802/38/pdf/n9580238.pdf?token=kupm4MulxfyjTKj83h&fe=true>

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> "Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women" (United Nations, 1998), Accessed 8 June 2022, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports/18report.pdf>.



aspect of women's lives reinforces traditional and stereotypical role expectations, which tend to limit women's full participation in society.<sup>61</sup>

After addressing its concerns, the Committee goes on to recommend numerous ways for Croatia to expand on women's rights, including gender quotas to ensure adequate representation, an education campaign that would illustrate an "equitable distribution" of family roles, and to cooperate with the "highly competent and active women's nongovernmental organizations in Croatia."<sup>62</sup>

BaBe and other feminist NGOs had already been employing a variety of tactics to counter the re-assertion of traditional gender roles both on a national level, through governmental monitoring and lobbying, and on the grassroots level, by organizing and hosting workshops to inform individual women about their rights. Documents from the post-war years (mainly 1996 and 1997), attest to these strategies. For instance, a report from Promoting Women in Development, a program funded by the Office of Women in Development at the United States Agency for International Development, details the successes of BaBe's 1996 Women's Human Rights Network for Education and Action (WHRNEA). The network itself acted as "an education and advocacy project [that aimed] to foster communication and collaboration among women activists and professionals" in the hopes of developing local, national, and international networks that promoted women's rights.<sup>63</sup> Within Croatia, this took the form of organizing workshops that addressed topics related to the country's legal and legislative systems so that individual women could be aware of what their rights were and how to exercise them effectively. When discussing the results of BaBe's initiative, the report mentions that since women's political participation emerged as a key issue at each of the basic workshops, BaBe expanded from its original intent and began providing advanced training on networking, coalition building, and women in politics.<sup>64</sup>

Soon after the WHRNEA project, BaBe shifted its attention to the 1997 elections. With the network it had created, BaBe planned to influence the elections to increase female representation in Parliament and in various localities. Internal documents reveal the extent of the network, now referred to as the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition: 18 women's groups from all around Croatia.<sup>65</sup> These groups included Ariadna, Rijeka (Autonomous Women's House, Zagreb); BaBe (Women's Human Rights Group, Zagreb); Center for

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>63</sup> Promoting Women in Development, *Human Rights, Advocacy, and the Empowerment of Women: An Education and Action Project in the Yugoslav Successor States* (International Center for Research on Women and The Centre for Development and Population Activities, 1999), Accessed 6 June 2022, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnach368.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnach368.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>65</sup> B.a.B.e., *The Women's Ad Hoc Coalition '97 to Influence and Monitor the Elections in Croatia* (Zagreb, April 1, 1997), Accessed 6 June 2022, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/62/030.html>.

Women War Victims (Zagreb); Center for Women Studies (Zagreb); Dalmatian Committee for the Affirmation of Women (Split); Electra (Zagreb); Rosa House (Zagreb); SOS Telephone for Women Victims of Violence (Zagreb); Women of Anti-War Campaign Croatia (Zagreb); Women's Group of the Center for Peace, Non-violence and Human Rights (Osijek); Women's Group (Losinj); Women's Group (Pakrac); Women's Group (Porec); Women's Group (Split); Women's Information and Documentation Center (Zagreb); Women's Peace Workshop (Suncokret, Rijeka); Workshop Open Door (Split). These groups gathered in Zagreb and decided on a common set of objectives that the Coalition would pursue:

- To promote women and women's agendas at the election.
- To increase the number of women in parliament and public offices.
- To monitor and influence elections from women's perspective.
- To enhance women's social and political status.
- To increase the awareness of women's human rights among policy makers, human rights activists and professionals such as lawyers, social workers, journalists and teachers.
- Networking and cooperation among women's groups in Croatia.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to their platform, the Coalition created advocacy materials which featured the figure 51%—the female percentage of the population—and the phrase “I exchange one corner of the house for a seat in the Parliament,” an ode to the common Croatian proverb that women keep three corners of the house (read: a woman's place and power is in the home).<sup>67</sup> The Coalition even went as far as developing a commercial to get the word out; it aired several times on national television.<sup>68</sup> Finally, they worked with young anarchists in Zagreb to ‘beautify’ the city with their leaflets, posters, and other printed material.<sup>69</sup> How effective were these women? What, if any, gains did they make with regards to their platform? As demonstrated in the following table, women have won substantial gains but have not achieved a fully equal presence in Croatia’s Parliament.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> B.a.B.e., *B.a.B.e. up-Date (January-April, 1997)*, 1997, Accessed 8 June 2022, <http://balkansnet.org/women/babe02.html>. See *Promoting Women in Development, Human Rights, Advocacy, and the Empowerment of Women*, 3, for a picture of B.a.B.e. members standing with their 51% posters in Zagreb.

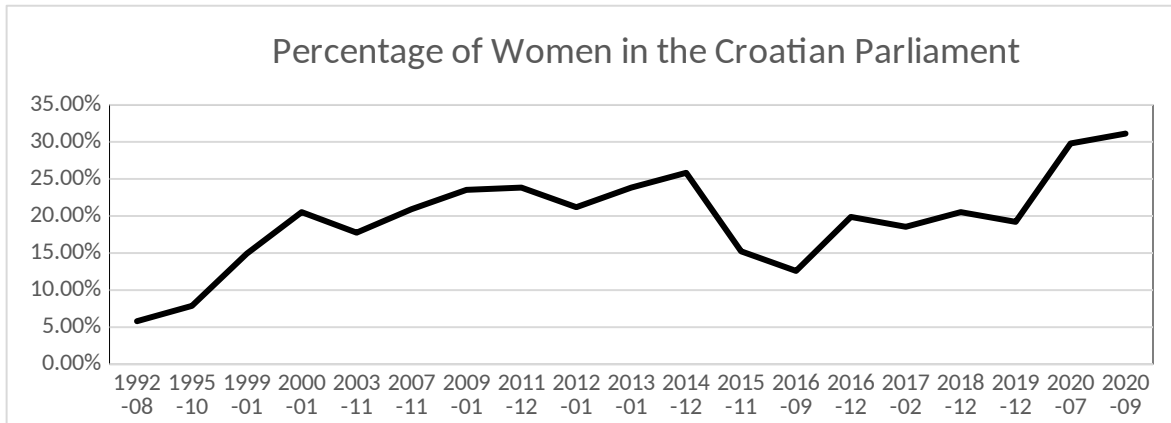


Figure 2: Parline Database on National Parliaments. Historical Data for Percentage of Women. Interparliamentary Union, 2021. [https://data.ipu.org/noe/42/data-onwomen?chamber\\_id=13374](https://data.ipu.org/noe/42/data-onwomen?chamber_id=13374)

First, as contemporary scholars like Dr. Jill Irvine, Professor Emerita in the department of International and Area Studies at the University of Oklahoma, and author of numerous articles on the democratic transformations of formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe, have argued, women played an integral role in the post-war elections. While Irvine’s work is mostly concerned with the role of the United States as a supporter of these women’s groups, and in a larger sense as a promoter of democracy, she gave specific attention to the methods utilized by women in these newly-democratic countries and the results they reaped. Irvine argued that “through creating capacity, finding voice, and forging alliances, they crafted an insider/inclusionary strategy that translated their strong position in the opposition into direct political gains for women at the polls.”<sup>70</sup>

Figure 2 illustrates just that: beginning in 1995, Croatian women increasingly gained representation in Parliament and that trend continued steadily for nearly two decades.<sup>71</sup> BaBe’s own president, Sanja Sarnavka, spoke of this trend while reflecting on her seventeen years of service:

It was fantastic. In the very beginning it was huge, because when we came out, for instance, with women not being present in the political sphere and the Parliament, after our campaign, we had risen from 7% of women in the

<sup>70</sup> Jill A. Irvine, “Electoral Breakthroughs in Croatia and Serbia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 2 (2013): 244–45.

<sup>71</sup> The drop in female representation after 2014 has been addressed by other scholars like Đurđa Knežević. See Đurđa Knežević, “Are Good Laws Enough? The Situation of Women in Croatia,” *The Heinrich Böll Foundation*, December 2013, Accessed 8 June 2022, [https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2013/12/knezevic.are\\_good\\_laws\\_enough.pdf](https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2013/12/knezevic.are_good_laws_enough.pdf). Thankfully it seems as if the trend has reversed itself and improved by reaching an all-time high of 31.79% in 2021.

Parliament before our campaigning and our public speeches to I think 28% of women.<sup>72</sup>

The Coalition's successes also went beyond parliamentary representation. As reported in BaBe documents, several political parties included the Coalition's platform within their own: "ASH (Action for Social Democrats in Croatia) adopted in 1995 the entire Coalition Platform, SDP (Social Democratic Party of Croatia) has put stronger emphasis on women and women's issues in their party program, and HSS (Croatian Rural Party) has adopted four points of the Coalition's platform to their party program."<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, after women secured legislative support, the Croatian Parliament was able to institute the Commission for Equality's national policy, which is based on the Beijing Platform for Action and consultation with domestic women's NGOs.<sup>74</sup> In the following years, Croatia went on to elect its first female prime minister, Jadranka Kosor in 2009, and, in 2015, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović was elected as the first woman president.

## Conclusion

How did Croatian women secure their place within their citizenry and how did they rise from such humble beginnings to the highest office in the country over the span of twenty years? Preliminary research shows that the Homeland War itself created a social gap that women filled. Through their pre-war protests, women cautiously stepped into the political world while advocating for the liberation of their sons who were JNA conscripts. These protests fell into a cultural grey area— one in which women were able to blur the lines between the domestic role of motherhood and acting as political agents in public. Therefore, they could participate politically without overstepping and subsequently being labeled as contrary to the traditional cultural values many Croats sought to uphold. This was particularly important for rural women like Danka Dražina, who were, initially, only able to support men through domestic roles (e.g. making coffee or keeping them company). Still, through their persistence and tenacity, these activist mothers went as far as testifying before the European Parliament as the envoys of Croatia. Despite their protests never quite succeeding, often due to the intricacies of international relations or simply a lack of tangible power, they still provided women with an acceptable outlet to voice their opinions and the necessary experience for their post-war success. Even when protests failed and war officially broke out, Croatian women still decided to defend *their* homeland because of their own personal sense of responsibility to it. As

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<sup>72</sup> del Portillo Cure, 69–70.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> *Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*, 10. The Beijing Platform for Action refers to the product of the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The Platform, also referred to as the Beijing Plan or Declaration, has acted as the international vision of women's rights. See <https://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about> for more information.

such, the war offered the opportunity to step beyond traditional gender roles, so thoroughly demonstrated by Vera Jurčević's service. Although they often lacked recognition, women like Marija Sliskovic still swear they would act the same way. Sliskovic states that "no one has ever said that my participation or the participation of any other woman in the Homeland War was significant. Yet I am certain that all of us would do the same in the same situation again. We were led by and given the strength by—love."<sup>75</sup> It was out of that love for country that Croatian women used their service in the lead up to, and during, the Homeland War to secure a better future for their daughters.

### About the Author

Matthew Cerjak is an incoming PhD student in History whose research focuses on the lives of women in the Atlantic World during the long eighteenth century. While he mostly writes on topics related to women and law, he undertook this project as a tribute to his Croatian mother and grandmother.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 36.

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