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**DECONSTRUCTING THE DEBATE ON THE ISTANBUL  
CONVENTION IN CROATIA: CONTRIBUTION OF FEMINIST  
THEOLOGY IN COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Lana Bobić

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## Abstract

In the research paper *Deconstructing the debate on the Istanbul Convention in Croatia: Contribution of Feminist Theology in Combating Violence Against Women* I am researching the ideological determinants and ways of public and political action of the anti-gender movement with respect to the process of ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Croatia in 2017 and the possibility of contribution of feminist theology to deconstructing “gender ideologies” and creating comprehensive mechanisms for combating gender-based violence against women. The paper consists of the introduction and four key parts: “Gender-based violence against women and the importance of the Istanbul Convention”; “Gender, 'gender ideology' and 'anti-gender movement' in the Republic of Croatia”; “An analysis of public action of the anti-gender campaign in relation to the public policy process of ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2017 in the Republic of Croatia”; “Feminist theology as an articulation of alternative, theologically-based approaches to the problem of discrimination and violence against women” and a conclusion with recommendations. To understand the origin and development of the concept of gender, and the misunderstandings of the concept, I rely on the book *How to Understand Gender? - History of Creation and Different Understanding in the Church* (Croat. *Kako razumjeti rod? Povijest nastanka i različita razumijevanja u Crkvi.*) by Jadranka Rebeka Anić. Qualitative methods have been used in the research, including a summary of the existing “anti-gender movement” analyses in the global and national context, an analysis of publicly available documents and reports from international and national institutions and non-governmental organisations and an analysis of media content related to the issue of ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Despite the official attitude of the Croatian Bishops' Conference and the loud voices of the “anti-gender movement” in positions of power within the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, I still dissociate the “anti-gender movement” from the Church, in order to point out that the Church is also those silent voices who disagree with the public discourse of the

Church on “gender ideologies”, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the stereotyping of gender roles, and who can theologially argue their disagreement.

**Key terms:** Violence against Women; the Istanbul Convention; Gender; Gender Ideologies; Anti-Gender Movement; the Church; Feminist Theology

### **1. Introduction: the social and political context as a motive for research**

The social and political developments in Croatia in 2017 were, , significantly marked by the controversy over the ratification of the “Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”, known as “the Istanbul Convention”. The Istanbul Convention is the first internationally binding document providing a comprehensive legal framework and approach to combating violence against women. Croatia signed the Convention in 2013 but has not yet ratified it.

On November 25, 2016, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković announced that the government would ratify the Istanbul Convention (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2017)<sup>1</sup>. In March 2017, the names of members of the working group were made public, which was to prepare the Government's proposal of the Act to ratify the Convention. In June 2017, changes in national legislation in order to comply with the Istanbul Convention indicated that there are indeed serious intentions to

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<sup>1</sup> All references and citations from official and media sources available online are listed under Bibliography and sources

ratify the Convention. In September 2017, the Government adopted the National Strategy for the Protection against Domestic Violence for the period 2017-2022, based on the fundamental principles of the Istanbul Convention. So, if the ratification of the Convention is a sure thing, or if it is just a matter of time, why have there been debates about it? In September 2017, the Croatian Bishops' Conference during a meeting of the Council for Life and Family agreed to oppose the ratification of the Istanbul Convention:

*“By reducing the concepts of 'gender' and 'sex' to mere social constructs, we are facing the danger of removing them from their ontological essence and surrendering them to interpretative relativism and discretion. It is necessary to prevent any form of ideological or arbitrary interference with the legal order, and especially that which concerns the very human identity from which all other human rights arise.” (Croatian Bishops' Conference, 2017)*

It is evident that precisely the concept of gender, to which is attributed an ideological meaning, has been a stumbling block to the Croatian Bishops' Conference for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, since the interpretation of gender contained in the Convention is seen as an infringement of the national legal order. How is it that a document primarily aimed to protect women from violence, particularly gender-based violence, has come to be understood as a document promoting a so-called “gender-based ideology”, or a revolution that is – as part of a broader “culture of death” – being sought via all means to be instilled in the human society in order to completely change not only the foundations of common life and its fundamental values, but also the very core of the human being” (Croatian Bishops' Conference, Male and female he created them! 2014)? In their “Position on the Istanbul Convention” from July 2017 the Vigilare association (*Translator's Note*: a registered NGO in Croatia, known for promoting conservative social values) warns of the unconstitutional and threatening nature of the Convention and the

morally unacceptable and socially devastating advocacy for its ratification. How has this discourse been forged, that minimises the problem of violence in relation to the dangers of “gender ideology” which are, according to Vigilare, not only unconstitutional, but have a disastrous impact on children and youth through education and upbringing (Narod.hr, 2017.)? That is, why are we discussing “gender ideology” instead of talking about the implementation of mechanisms to protect women from gender-based violence?

### **Gender-based violence against women and the importance of the Istanbul Convention**

According to the statistics of the World Health Organisation, one out of three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. Violence against women is a pervasive global phenomenon, while social and cultural practices make a difference only in the forms of violence and the ways in which society deals with violence. Violence can happen to any woman regardless of her status, and the offender may be a member of the family, a familiar person or a stranger; may be of a higher or lower level of education; employed or unemployed; but also a highly respected member of the society. The reason for violence against women is power and control, and men use different forms of direct violence to maintain it (psychological, economic, physical and/or sexual). Apart from personal violence where the *perpetrators of violence* (subject), *the victims* (object) and their *mutual relationship* (violent act) are known, there is also structural violence. Structural or indirect violence does not refer to individual perpetrators of violence but to relations of violence incorporated in various social, cultural and religious norms and institutions. It may be so firmly rooted that it fails to be noticed or even recognised as violence, although it in fact is violence, and it is observed, for example, in cultural justifications and excuses that perpetuate certain power structures. As such, it is socially accepted, and reflects the asymmetry of power in social relations. The existence of structural violence is indicated by the widespread occurrence of personal violence. Gender stereotypes are

a form of structural violence, and thus, along with other forms of structural violence facilitate personal violence.

Violence against women as a global systemic problem is perceived as a social mechanism that places women in a subordinate position in relation to men and as such is a reflection of existing gender relations in the society and politics. It is a form of discrimination against women and prevents women from exercising their human rights.

*“Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women.” (United Nations, 1996)*

Advocates of traditional values in patriarchal societies consider the most important role of a woman to be that of a wife and a mother. There is a deeply rooted idea that a marriage must be preserved at all costs for the sake of preserving the family and the stigma of being a divorced woman is associated with the assumption that she is the one responsible for the divorce. Even in Europe old patriarchal structures remained firmly in place throughout the twentieth century and in some countries women gained the right to vote only after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> In the early seventies, the second wave of feminism readdressed the question of structural and interpersonal violence against women as a social issue. Women were regularly exposed to violence by their husbands or partners. Many women found that the state and judicial authorities were not interested in fighting violence against women. The corpus of human rights had traditionally been aimed at protecting human rights from direct violations by the state, while violations of human

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<sup>2</sup> In Switzerland and Portugal, for example, women's suffrage is not introduced before the 1970s

rights by individuals were considered a part of the “private sphere” beyond the scope of international law (Centre for Women War Victims ROSA, 2015). In addition, the right to the protection of private and family life was historically interpreted as a principle of prohibiting interference of the state in the family sphere, resulting in no sanctions against domestic violence over a long period of time. According to the UN's “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” (CEDAW)<sup>3</sup>, governments are obliged:

*“To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women”* (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

It should be noted that the previous citation explicitly points out the dangers of stereotyping gender roles, and in this UN Convention violence against women is viewed not as a “private” but as a structural problem. The United Nations Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993 states in its final document known as the “Vienna Declaration” that acts of violence against women are violations of human rights, even if committed in a so-called private setting. Several months after the “Vienna Declaration” the United Nations adopted the “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women” and established the function of a Special Rapporteur to report on violence against women. Although the first document to prohibit war time rape dates back to the American Civil War in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the Lieber Code, 1863), no such rape was prosecuted until the establishment of the International Tribunals of former

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<sup>3</sup> The Convention was ratified by the Republic of Croatia on September 9<sup>th</sup> 1992, and the Optional Protocol on March 7<sup>th</sup> 2001

Yugoslavia (1994) and Rwanda (1995). The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, in its Statute, specifically refers to rape and gives precedence to cases of abuse of women and children in court proceedings, and according to the Hague Tribunal, rape can be prosecuted as a crime against humanity (“Mass Rape in Wartime”, Women War Memory, 2017). The elimination of violence against women was also the main topic of the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. In its final documents, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN, 1995), the Conference proposes a range of institutional changes to ensure the full enjoyment of human rights by women and to promote nonviolent conflict resolution and global peace. Following this conference, the terms of “gender, gender equality, gender-sensitive policies become part of the wider social discourse” (Anić, 2012, p. 31). Violence against women is not treated as a social problem until the 1960s, and only with its transition from the private to the social sphere could this problem finally be addressed systematically, through national and international legal mechanisms. The elimination of violence against women has over the last ten years become one of the global goals for sustainable development and is perceived as a prerequisite for an equal and just society (UN Women).

Since the 1990s, the Council of Europe has launched a series of initiatives to promote the protection of women against violence, and numerous analyses, reports and studies have pointed out the problem of inadequate protection of women from violence and drawn attention to significant differences in systems of protection against violence in different European countries. Therefore, after establishing the need to define a comprehensive set of standards for preventing and combating violence against women, in 2008 the Council of Europe convened a working group of experts (consisting of both women and men) which in 2010 adopted the final draft of the “Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence”. After Italy, the Vatican, the United Kingdom and Russia made their amendments to the text, the final version of the Convention was approved by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Drawing on existing international documents and



recommendations, the Convention addresses all forms of violence against women in times of peace and armed conflict and is currently the most comprehensive legal framework for combating violence against women and domestic violence. Although recognising that men may also be victims of domestic violence, the Convention argues that women and girls are at a greater risk of gender-based violence than men and that domestic violence affects women disproportionately. The gender-based dimension of violence against women is crucial to understanding the mechanisms of domination and the dynamics of violence against women, as evidenced by numerous scientific researches, real-life experiences and available statistics.

In Croatia, the equality of women and men is frequently addressed by the relevant legislation, owing, among other things, to the EU anti-discrimination policy. The practical implementation of laws, however, still reveals many examples of discrimination and inequality, especially with respect to violence against women, as the most brutal form of discrimination against women. According to the data of the Autonomous Women's House Zagreb (2016), a number of problems can be identified: double arrests due to a failure to recognise the primary offender; the lack of skills of public law officers in dealing with women who survived violence; the fact that during their stay in the women's shelter none of the women qualified for public housing, although as victims of violence they are entitled to it; criminal proceedings in cases of sexual violence that often result in revictimisation of women; generally low sentences for perpetrators.

In her Annual Report for 2016 the Ombudsman for Gender Equality notes that “based on the sex structure of the reported perpetrators of domestic violence in 2016 there were 9,217 men (77 %) and 2,731 women (23%).” (Ombudsman, 2016 Annual Report, full version, p. 85). A total of 2,408 criminal offences with elements of violence involving closely related persons were recorded. The aforementioned criminal offenses included a total of 2,552 victims. Out of the total number of victims, 1,948 were women (10% more than in 2015) and 604 men (0.5% less

than in 2015). As far as perpetrators are concerned, out of the total number of 1648 perpetrators of violence against closely related persons, 1,519 (92%) were men and 129 (8%) women. Among perpetrators of sexual offences (of rape, sexual intercourse without consent and sexual harassment) 100 per cent were men and not a single woman. According to the Report, these figures clearly point to the fact that domestic violence is gender-based and primarily directed against women (Ombudsman, 2016, p. 85, 88). Furthermore, the Ombudsman warns of the growing problem of femicide, which accounts for 25-30% of all murders in the Republic of Croatia, noting a significant increase in the number of women murdered by closely related men in 2016. The share of women murdered by closely related men (15) in the total number of murders among closely related persons (19 murders and murders with special circumstances) is namely 78%, representing the highest percentage in the last 7 years. Noticing a trend of brutalisation of violence, the Ombudsman highlights the need for urgent changes in the system of preventing and combating violence against women. Available data on psycho-social treatments conducted (including 336 people, out of whom 53 were women) again indicate a failure in the use of available protection and support measures. With the ratification of the Convention such measures would, however, have to be implemented, since, according to the Convention, the governments “*shall provide or strengthen appropriate training for the relevant professionals dealing with victims or perpetrators*” and “*set up or support treatment programmes*” for perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual offenders in particular.<sup>4</sup>

In 2015, the UN Human Rights Committee and the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed their concerns and submitted recommendations to Croatia regarding the status of women's human rights (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2015). Among other things, their concerns included some of the practices also referred to by the

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<sup>4</sup>*Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Article 16, Paragraph 2*

Ombudsman and by non-governmental organisations, such as double arrests due to a failure to recognise the primary offender, inadequate sanctions for perpetrators of violence, as well as a definition of rape which is not in line with international jurisprudence. The committees also pointed to an insufficient number of shelters with appropriate resources for female victims of violence and a generally lacking system of assistance and support to women victims of violence (Voxfeminae, 2017), which is again not in accordance with the Convention, stating that the parties, i.e. governments, shall:

*“...provide or arrange for specialist women’s support services to all women victims of violence and their children.”<sup>5</sup>*

In this context, during his visit to Croatia in 2016, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health Dainius Puras said that “there is no systematic and adequate financing of shelters and counselling centres for women victims of violence in Croatia and added that legal reforms are needed to protect women from domestic violence” (Marinković, 2016). The committees also called for efficient sanctions in cases of discriminatory media content. In March 2017, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muižniek sent Prime Minister Andrej Plenković a letter encouraging Croatia to move quickly towards the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Rešković, 2017), repeating what the aforementioned committees and Puras had urged for since 2015. Even though its ratification is only a matter of time, public space is contaminated with “gender ideology” as the dominant discourse on the issue of the Istanbul Convention.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Article 22, Paragraph 2

## **Gender, “gender ideology” and “anti-gender movement”**

To understand the underlying issue, we need to revisit the Beijing Conference in 1995. Dale O'Leary, a Catholic writer and activist (whose work played an important role among the conservative and fundamentally oriented delegates of the Holy See at the Beijing Conference) in her own interpretation of feminism also introduces the idea of a cultural war which she applies to the concept of gender (Anić, 2011). Although in the tradition of interpreting the notion of gender within the corpus of women's human rights and according to the European Commission's “100 words for equality – A glossary of terms on equality between women and men”, gender is defined as:

*“A concept that refers to the social differences between women and men that have been learned, are changeable over time and have wide variations both within and between cultures.”*

O'Leary speaks of the term used at the conference in Beijing as “a code for abortion and lifestyle”, or homosexuality. However, in numerous international documents, including the Beijing Declaration and the Istanbul Convention, the term of gender is used to regulate the relationship between men and women rather than the rights of homosexual persons, which are within the vast corpus of European legislation regulated based on the status of sexual orientation (Anić, 2011 ). By defining gender as a code for homosexuality, O'Leary presents it as part of a “conspiracy of gender feminists who are out to conduct a serious social revolution around the world” (Anić, 2012, p. 38). Anić shows how the concept of gender came to be misinterpreted by the Church and reveals the origins of “gender ideology” in American antifeminism and Catholic fundamentalism. The principles of these teachings then influence the Pontifical Council for the Family, and consequently the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and numerous

ecclesiastical documents, thus spreading the idea of a cultural war throughout Europe. According to Anić, O'Leary interprets the gender perspective as:

*“The deconstruction of motherhood as a universal woman's urge; population control; promotion of sexual pleasures; elimination of differences between women and men; universal 50-50 employment quotas and full time working hours for women to subvert maternity; free contraception, legal abortion, promotion of homosexuality; sex education courses for children to encourage sexual experimentation among children and teach them about contraception and abortion, teaching about homosexuality as being normal and men and women as being the same; eliminating parental rights so that parents are not able to prevent sexual education, discrediting all religious people who are opposed to this program.” (Anić, 2012, pp. 38-39).*

O'Leary regards the gender perspective as a neo-Marxist interpretation of world history in which gender replaces class. Anić further analyses how Gabriele Kuby, whose book *Nova ideologija seksualnosti* (Translator's Note: Croatian edition of *Die Gender-Revolution: Relativismus in Aktion*, Eng. *The Gender Revolution: Relativism in Action*) appears on the reading list of the Istina o Istanbulskoj website (eng. Truth about the Istanbul Convention), draws on antifeminist and fundamentalist interpretations by O'Leary. According to Anić, Kuby claims that “gender is not about equality between men and women, but is a code for promoting the rights of homosexuals; the term 'gender' should be removed from use and replaced by the old word 'sex'; the Roman Catholic Church is a sworn enemy of the gender revolution and all its leaders, followers and associates” (Anić, 2012, p.40). In her book *Kako razumjeti rod? - Povijest rasprave i različita razumijevanja u Crkvi* (eng. *How to understand gender? The history of discussions and different understandings in the Church*) Anić analyses the development history of the gender concept and the emergence of “gender ideology” and observes the contradiction in

linking homosexuality with the concept of gender, given the fact that the LGBTIQ community itself criticises the gender concept as being a heterosexual matrix. She further notes that returning to the term of sex as recommended by Kuby would not change much, since the problem of using gender or sex as a term does not address the underlying issues raised in gender debates. In a detailed analysis of international and Church documents she finds strong arguments for the deconstruction of “gender ideology” and points out that the Catholic Church cannot be a sworn enemy of gender revolutionaries, since both male and female theologians use gender as an analytical category in their research (Anić, 2011). In addition, in Church documents, we find two opposite understandings of the term “gender”, one of which interprets gender as:

*“Rivalry and struggle between women and men, subversion of the family and anthropology that seeks to free women from biological dualism under the pretence of equality while in fact undermining natural parenting and promoting homosexuality and polymorphous sexuality” (Anić, 2012, p. 29)*

and the other one as:

*“A method that should help women and men to freely access all areas of life, from economy to politics on the one hand to private life on the other, unrestrained by any inherited roles” (Anić, 2012, p. 30).*

Despite the positive practices in understanding the concept of gender, the fact remains that the unpreparedness, or insufficient knowledge and understanding of the concept of gender by the Holy See's Delegation during the Beijing Conference, contributed to the acceptance and spreading of the ideas of a “hidden agenda” and the threat of “gender ideology”.

The editors of the book *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, conducted a comparative analysis of seemingly different anti-gender national movements across Europe. The analysis, however, indicates the existence of a number of common factors: attacks on the rights and issues of LGBTIQ persons, women (emphasis on reproductive and sexual rights), sexual education, gender studies and democracy. Anti-gender campaigns have been observed as national phenomena in their countries, but a thorough analysis of developments over the last few years suggests that they are in fact manifestations of a global movement. The authors also maintain that anti-gender movements interpret “gender ideology” (i.e. “gender theory” or “genderism”) as a hidden agenda of radical feminists and LGBTIQ activists set out to destroy the world as we know it - motherhood, fatherhood, family, our children, tradition and - in countries with intertwined religious and national identities - religion and homeland.

*“‘Gender ideology’, however, is not only regarded as an anthropological and epistemological threat but also as a covert political strategy, a sort of conspiracy aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and minority values to average people” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 17).*

In analysing the term “gender ideology”, Kuhar and Paternotte also refer to the Cairo Conference in 1994 and the Beijing Conference in 1995 to examine the roots of the misunderstanding and misconception of the term. Mentioning Gabriele Kuby as a prominent advocate of the anti-gender movement, the authors continue by underlining that:

*“(...)'gender ideology' does not designate gender studies, but is a term initially created to oppose women's and LGBT rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing*

*essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality*” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 16).

Kuhar and Paternotte see anti-gender movements as a new family within conservative movements. They also identify their main strategy: anti-gender movements combine partial facts with fictitious constructions that are then shaped into apparently common-sense claims and, according to the editors, continuously repeated both in mainstream media and through their social media in particular, and then finally turned into “mobilising truths”. An integral part of anti-gender campaigns is spreading fear of “gender ideology” and then, under the guise of concerned citizens, “rescuing” society from its dangers by initiating anti-gender campaigns, appearing in the media and skilfully using the tools of lobbying, litigation, electoral mobilisation, party politics (including the establishment of new political parties). As a method to directly influence individual opinions in order to produce a shift in public opinion, anti-gender movements often mobilise their own local allies and organise panels, lectures, protests, referendum campaigns and signature collections. They skilfully make use of contemporary media culture focused on conflicts to gain additional media visibility and boost their growth. They also actively use online space by constantly launching and promoting new websites, and they are extremely engaged on social networks as well. The book analyses the action strategies of different anti-gender movements in a number of countries across Europe in the period from 2012 to 2014, and authors of the Croatian case study, Hodžić and Štulhofer<sup>6</sup>, observe a series of seemingly unrelated but strategically designed campaigns culminating in the 2013 constitutional referendum for marriage. In 2014, in their report on *Neo-Conservative Threats to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the European Union*, Nataša Bjelić and Amir Hodžić note

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<sup>6</sup>Hodžić Amir, Štulhofer Sleksandar; *Embryo, Teddy Bear-Centaur and the Constitution: Mobilisations against "Gender Ideology" and Sexual Permissiveness in Croatia*, (the Croatian case study is included in Chapter 4 of the book *Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against Equality*, p. 81- 102)



that in Croatia anti-gender campaigns made a big entrance through education debates, using the strategy of citizens' rights and arguments of freedom of choice that is justified by the "freedom of religious conviction" and "around which they then create a discourse of cultural and ideological conflict, as well as deep division in Croatian society". However, the authors also notice a change of strategy in the period between 2012 and 2014:

*"Also, just like anywhere in Europe, Croatian 'defenders of life, family and religious freedom' have started to claim a concept of human rights for their reasoning discourse, but they selectively emphasize traditional, catholic values."* (Bjelić, Hodžić, 2014, p.22).

Bjelić and Hodžić also take note of the complex network of alliances within neo-conservative groups and anti-gender movements, resulting in quite blurred lines between secular agents (civil initiatives, civil society organisations and political parties) and religious hierarchies. These are more closely analysed by Kuhar and Paternotte, who conclude that the connection between the anti-gender movement and the Vatican policies is undisputable, as clearly reflected in the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the term gender and the emergence of the term "gender ideology". They note that the connections between the Roman Catholic Church and the anti-gender movements differ depending on the country, given the fact that the anti-gender movement tends to readily adapt its mechanisms of action to the particular national context. For example, in Germany, we witness a very weak association of the Church with such movements, while the connection of the anti-gender movement with the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia is evident from the discourse promoted by the Croatian Bishops' Conference (HBK) and the open ties between Kaptol and anti-gender groups in Croatia.

Bjelić and Hodžić warn of the "significant influence" that anti-gender campaigners "have started to achieve" in Croatia, but also note that the outline of the Croatian anti-gender movement actually is "a small group of very well connected people, mostly members of several

families that are interlinked by friendship and business, acting through a dozen ‘citizens’ organisations and initiatives” (Bjelić, Hodžić, 2014, p.22).

Gender debates became current in 2008 around the adoption of the Anti-Discrimination Act, but the anti-gender movement in Croatia came into public focus only in 2012. However, the groundwork for the movement was laid much earlier, in 1996, with the introduction of TeenSTAR, an abstinence-based sex education program (originally developed in America), teaching that “contraception doesn’t protect against sexually transmitted diseases, that a woman’s a place is at home, that a mother’s unemployment is an important factor in the prevention of risky sexual behaviour of children, etc.” (Živković, 2017). In 2006, the Voice of Parents for Children association (Glas roditelja za djecu - GROZD)<sup>7</sup> was formed to promote the rights of parents to educate their children in accordance with “Croatian values”. In 2012 GROZD proposed a review of the constitutionality of the health education curriculum. As a part of the campaign open letters were sent out to the minister of education and the prime minister at the time, presenting the “damages” of health education to parish priests, parents and teachers. In the same year, Cardinal Josip Bozanić used his Christmas sermon to warn about the covert introduction of “gender ideology” through the education system. GROZD is also supported by the Vigilare<sup>8</sup> organisation, advocating the protection of children from premature sexualisation,

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<sup>7</sup> The association was founded by Ladislav Ilčić and Kristina Pavlović, and its first vice-president was Željka Markić, who later founded the association called "In the Name of the Family" (U ime obitelji). Although education is the main area of GROZD's interest, they also actively support the campaign to legally ban abortion and the campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and are part of the *I have a right to live* initiative (Croat. Imam pravo živjeti)

<sup>8</sup> Vigilare operates in Croatia through two legal entities: the association (<http://vigilare.org/>) and the foundation (<http://www.vigilare.hr/>). Both entities are registered at the same address in Zagreb and the president of both is John Vice Batarelo. The Vigilare Foundation states that it was founded for the purposes of: promotion and defence of cultural heritage and accomplishments of Christian civilisation; promotion and defence of Christian values, promotion and protection of the right to life from natural conception to natural death; promoting the original essence of marriage as a life union of man and woman and the meaning of family as the core unit of

brainwashing, experimenting with children, and calling for the protection of life and family as a union of father, mother and children.

The “In the Name of the Family”<sup>9</sup> initiative came into public eye in April 2013 when they announced the beginning of a signature collection campaign for a referendum to constitutionally define marriage as a union of man and woman. With the help of a number of related and affiliated organisations and initiatives and the support of the Roman Catholic Church, in two weeks they were able to collect a sufficient number of signatures for the first citizen-initiated referendum in the Republic of Croatia, which resulted in the constitutional definition of marriage as a union of woman and man. Croatian Cardinal Josip Bozanić, in an open letter, invited all believers, women and men alike, to vote for the definition of marriage as a union of woman and man.

In 2015, In the Name of the Family initiative launched the Croatian version of an originally American pro-life march, the “Walk For Life”<sup>10</sup>, which aimed to legally ban abortion. In

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society in which children are raised ([www.vigilare.hr](http://www.vigilare.hr)). Vigilare is part of a global movement called Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), which includes Vigilare on their website in the list of other TFPs and inspired and related groups (<http://www.tfp.org/links-tfps-inspired-related-groups/>), and which advocates Counter-Revolution - the return to the order of Christian civilisation, strict and hierarchical, fundamentally sacred, anti-egalitarian and anti-liberal. (<http://faktograf.hr/2017/05/11/tfp-vigilare-srednjovjekovni-upliv-u-rad-hrvatske-vlade/>)

<sup>9</sup> The association called „In the Name of the Family" (U ime obitelji - UIO) was founded by Željka Markić, also the president of the association, although its website states that it was formed from a civic initiative for a referendum on marriage (<http://uimeobitelji.net/>). Their statute lists the following fundamental objectives: the protection and promotion of family values, the protection and promotion of the dignity of marriage and the family, of human sexuality, of birth and of every human life, as well as strengthening of the quality and harmony of marriage through programs of marital enrichment, and providing professional and organised support to marriages and families in crisis; emphasising and advocating positive elements of marriage and family (in their physical, psychological, spiritual and social aspects) through educational campaigns and means of public communication.

<sup>10</sup> “Hod za život” is the Croatian version of the American “Walk for Life”, an annual pro-life march protesting to ban abortion. The event's website claims it is a “widely known fact that life begins at conception”, which is why

November 2016 the Vigilare Foundation and the ProLife Initiative launched the “I Want to Live” campaign, followed by a petition signing campaign under a similar name – “I have the right to live”, both directed against legal abortion. The campaign was accompanied by a discourse on the dangers of “gender ideology” and “culture of death”. The manipulations and spreading of misinformation used in the “I Want to Live” campaign (such as posters with a photo of a woman far along in her pregnancy, although abortion on request is possible in Croatia only up to the 10<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy, as well as the use of a narrative in which the embryo is attributed full consciousness) caused the Ombudsman for Gender Equality to react and the media reported that she found the campaign’s promo video “to promote hatred against women and doctors acting in accordance with Croatian law” (Hina, Jutarnji list, 2016). Regardless of such warnings, the campaign continued to run along the same tracks.

The main topics of the anti-gender campaigns in Croatia are evidently education, human rights of LGBTIQ persons and women's human rights, i.e. sexuality. The anti-gender movement in Croatia actively cooperates with the Spanish organisation and platform CitizenGO, a community of active citizens whose activities are based on online petitions aimed at the protection and promotion of life, the family and human rights, and whose website is also available in Croatian. Kuhar and Paternotte, too, warn against this platform as a known tool in anti-gender campaigns across Europe. Thus, in January 2017, the “No to the Istanbul Convention” petition appears on CitizenGO, claiming that the Convention “is based on the presumption that women and girls are at a greater risk of gender-based domestic violence than men, which is not substantiated by objective and reliable data”.<sup>11</sup> This is an obvious

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they advocate the legal protection of human life from the moment of conception (<https://www.hodzazivot.hr/zasto-hod-za-zivot/>)

<sup>11</sup> The "No to the Istanbul Convention" (Croat. „Ne ideološkoj konvenciji Vijeća Europe") petition is active on the CitizenGO online platform as of January 2017, at;<http://www.citizengo.org/hr/fm/40096-ne-idoloskoj-konvenciji-vijeca-europe> (28.11. 2017)

manipulation that dangerously and intentionally minimises the problem of violence against women.

### **An analysis of public action of the anti-gender campaign in relation to the 2017 public policy process of ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the Republic of Croatia**

During the first half of 2017, the campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was conducted through seemingly unrelated reactions from many different sides. The anti-gender movement very skilfully combined manipulating the Convention's contents with media campaigns and serious lobbying that was reflected in the support by members of the Church hierarchy, the academic community and the political scene.

On March 8, 2017, the Government announced the names of members of the working group which was to prepare the Government's proposal of the Act to ratify the Istanbul Convention, including – in addition to representatives of the Government, the Office of the Gender Equality Ombudsman and the Faculty of Law, the independent expert Dubravko Šimonović and representatives of associations dealing with women's rights (Sanja Sarnavka and Neva Tolle) – also two members who opposed the adoption of the Istanbul Convention for imposing a dangerous “gender ideology” - Ivan Munjin from the “On behalf of the family” (Croat. U ime obitelji) association and Ivan Prskalo from the Ordo iuris civic association. This raised quite a lot of dust, with the media wondering about the choice of ratification opponents for drafting of the ratification act, but also about their lack of experience and expertise in the area of women's human rights and violence against women (Despot, 2017).

The Ministry of Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy opened a public debate on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017 regarding the draft Act on the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which ended on 3 August 2017. The Public Consultation Report was published in October on the e-Savjetovanja

web site (e-Counseling), only to be removed the very same day. However, according to journalist Sanja Despot, the report showed that “the ministry did not accept any of the objections that largely referred to the alleged introduction of 'gender ideology’”.

On 12 September 2017, the European Parliament adopted the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The “On behalf of the family” association immediately issued a public report and sent out a letter to Croatian MEPs, urging them to nevertheless take a stand against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention at the national level.

On the same day, September 12<sup>th</sup>, the Council for Life and Family of the Croatian Bishops' Conference convened. “The Church cannot stay aloof when it comes to the protection of fundamental values” was a document which reported on the conclusions of the Conference meeting and called upon the Croatian Parliament not to ratify the Istanbul Convention.

In September 2017 the word “gender” was removed from the City of Zagreb’s development strategy and the explanation later argued that this had been done with the purpose of harmonising the terminology with Croatian legislation. The “I Want to Live” campaign and the related “I Have the Right to Live” petition culminated with the handing over of the 168,561 collected signatures in October 2017. Before the actual presentation of the “Truth about the Istanbul Convention” initiative to the public, the organisers of the aforementioned signature handover used the opportunity to call for non-ratification of the Istanbul Convention in addition to promoting the protection of “unborn children”. Representatives of the Vigilare association and the ProLife initiative met with the representatives of the ruling majority, Željko Reiner, Davor Ivo Stier, Ante Babić, Ivan Čelić and HRAST's Hrvoje Zekanović, as reported by Večernji list among others.

In November 2017, TradFest – an annual festival of tradition and conservative ideas – was organised for the third time in a row by the Vigilare Foundation. The foundation’s president,

John Vice Batarelo, up until recently headed the Zagreb Archdiocese's Office for the Pastoral Care of the Family. The topic of this year's Tradfest were human rights, gender ideology, and militant secularism, and some of the major figures of the international anti-gender movement appeared among the speakers, including the representatives of Ordo Iuris from Poland and the Christian Legal Centre from England. As reported by journalist Ana Brakus, the representatives of these two organisations explained in detail “how to use the freedom of speech to spread misinformation and manipulate the public” and demonstrated “which fears and prejudice to encourage in order to maximally deny the right of expressing gender identity and to deny the existence of gender-based violence.” As in previous years, Damir Stojić, a Salesian priest and a popular student chaplain in Zagreb, as well as an active promoter of the cultural war and the struggle against “gender ideology”, also appeared as one of the speakers.

On November 30<sup>th</sup> 2017, the Croatian Bishop's Conference sent out the bishops' message addressing school education, family law and the Istanbul Convention, warning of the dangers of “gender ideology” that “introduces a new understanding of human sexuality that interferes with the very essence of a person.”

The anti-gender campaign against the Istanbul Convention culminated in the “Truth About the Istanbul Convention” initiative, which was first presented to the public in October 2017 and actually launched by the end of November. The initiative describes itself as a civic initiative “aiming to introduce the Croatian public to the actual contents and consequences of the Istanbul Convention.” Other than through its web site and billboards throughout Croatia, the Initiative is, among other things, also conducting an intensive social networks campaign and mobilisation through a mailing list, calling on supporters to organise informative events themselves: “All parish priests in Croatia have been informed of the initiative launch and received materials for organising forums in their parish to discuss the so-called Istanbul Convention and 'gender ideology'.” “We invite you to contact your parish priests by all means and offer to hold a brief

and simple forum with their parishioners!” (Rapaić, 2017) On November 18, 2017, an expert meeting on the topic of the Istanbul Convention and the dangers of “gender ideology” was held at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute in Zagreb.

The initiative offers a series of untruths and misinformation on the content of the Convention and summarises the main arguments of the anti-gender movement. Their website states that:

*“The Istanbul Convention is the first international treaty to define (in Article 3c) the term 'gender', which is mentioned in the text of the Convention on 24 occasions. According to this definition, 'gender' represents a social construct and a variable that is independent of sex, of biological reality. The separation of sex and gender (as evident in Article 4, paragraph 3) has the effect of creating a belief that a human is born as a neutral being who can later choose whether to be a man or a woman or any of the other numerous 'genders' (homo, gay, lesbian, queer, trans, incest, animal, paedo ...”*

*“Accepting this definition requires identification with certain dogmas of gender theory that do not have a scientific base (moreover, they are proven to be non-scientific) or a steady place within the legal order of the Republic of Croatia. For example, the Convention (Article 4, paragraph 3) places the concepts of 'gender', 'gender identity' and 'sexual orientation' among the possible grounds of discrimination, whereas such concepts do not even exist in the Constitution and other laws of the Republic of Croatia.”*

The text of the Convention itself, in Article 3, states:

*“Paragraph c – 'gender' shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men;”*



Article 4,

*“Paragraph 3 – The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status.”*

The Convention here draws on numerous international documents and the usual terminology used in the field of human rights as well as the usual practice of interpreting gender as a social difference between woman and man that has been learned and is changeable over time. Given that these differences are changeable, they cannot be a dogma as the initiative points out. The terms gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation appear in a number of Croatian laws, such as the Anti-Discrimination Act (in force as of 2008), which mentions concepts deemed controversial by the anti-gender movement in the very first article. The non-acceptance of the term gender therefore represents non-observance of both the Croatian constitutional order and of international documents Croatia has signed or acceded to. Furthermore, the interpretation of gender as a term that “abolishes sexual differences and allows the belief that humans are born as neutral beings and can later choose what to be – *homo, gay, lesbian, queer, trans, incest, animal, paedo ...*”, except for being an incorrect understanding and interpretation of the concept itself, also spreads misinformation aimed at vilifying LGBTIQ persons: “The paedo-gender does not exist, of course,” says journalist Ana Benačić, “but its fabrication very much resembles well-known and widely spread chauvinistic attacks against sexual minorities attempting to impose a non-existent link between homosexuality and paedophilia, and even, according to the so-called ‘Truth about the Istanbul Convention’, zoophilia and incest.”

The next article which the Initiative sees as disputable is Article 12:

*“Paragraph 1 – Parties shall take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men.”*

What the “Truth about the Istanbul Convention” initiative finds problematic here is the lack of definition of stereotyped gender roles and the fact the interpretation of these roles is largely determined by the cultural context:

*“... and different countries and different social groups offer quite broad interpretations on the matter, some of them even referring to the basic family roles such as motherhood and fatherhood as undesirable stereotyped gender roles. Also, with the ratification of the Convention, the male-female image of mankind, family and marriage that is consistent with the nature of man and woman and as such supported by all cultures and major religions of the world, could be stigmatised as an outdated and undesirable 'tradition based on stereotyped gender roles'”.*

According to Gender Equality Glossary of the Council of Europe, gender stereotypes represent preconceived ideas whereby males and females are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex. The glossary further argues that gender stereotyping can greatly limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of people and as such “presents a serious obstacle to the achievement of real gender equality and feeds into gender discrimination”. The glossary recognises that stereotypes about women result from deeply engrained attitudes, values, norms and prejudices against women and that such imposed roles or stereotypes reproduce unwanted and harmful practices and contribute to make violence

against women acceptable. Article 12 of the Convention therefore refers to the prevention of violence, including the eradication of all practices that encourage and enable violence against women.

In Article 14, which addresses education, the “Truth about the Istanbul Convention” initiative sees a whole series of threats, arguing that this article of the Convention opens up a real danger of children being taught both through the education system and the media that “by gender” boys can be girls and that girls can “by gender” be boys. They also see the Convention as jeopardising the right of parents to be the primary educators and as narrowing the space of pluralism by spreading “gender ideology” even in “informal educational facilities, as well as in sports, cultural and leisure facilities and the media.” Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention, however, states:

*“Paragraph 1 – Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education.*

*Paragraph 2 – Parties shall take the necessary steps to promote the principles referred to in paragraph 1 in informal educational facilities, as well as in sports, cultural and leisure facilities and the media.”*

It is therefore not clear where the Initiative draws the conclusion from that children would be taught in kindergartens, schools and through the media to choose their sex “by gender”. Apparently, the spreading of “gender ideology” is read by the initiative from the very terms of gender equality and stereotyped gender roles, which would be rather unfortunate considering the fact that gender equality is one of the basic principles of human and women's human rights and

achieving gender equality is one of the UN's global goals. It should be noted in this context that the Primary and Secondary School Education Act states that the purpose of education is “to educate children in accordance with the general cultural and civilization values, human rights and the rights of children, to build their multicultural competence, respect for diversity and tolerance and prepare them to become active and responsible participants in the democratic development of society”.<sup>12</sup> And no less important, the Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that the education of the child shall be directed to: a) the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; b) the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the principles contained in the Charter of the United Nations.

The website of the “The Truth about the Istanbul Convention” initiative offers definitions of the term gender and describes the effects of “gender ideology” in the countries where it was introduced. The website, among other things, argues that laws on so-called “gender self-determination” allow a person to “change his/her gender” in personal documents based on a mere statement of “feeling” as a member of the opposite sex. It allows men to enter women's prisons, shelters, to compete in sports in women's categories, then to raise children “gender-neutral”, to teach them that they can choose whether to be boys or girls, to use hormone-blockers for delaying puberty in children, so they can later “decide” on their own sex or “gender”. The given examples clearly demonstrate the usual strategy of anti-gender movements described by Kuhar and Paternotte – combining partial facts with fictitious constructions that are then shaped into apparently common-sense claims and through continuous repeating both in mainstream media and through their social media finally turned into “mobilizing truths”. Speaking on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 25 November 2017,

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<sup>12</sup> Primary and Secondary School Education Act (Article 4)

the Gender Equality Ombudsman Višnja Ljubičić said that the public manipulation of information in cases where the Istanbul Convention and its contents are brought into connection with paedophilia, homosexuality and transvestism was unacceptable.

The constant confusion of gender identity and sexual orientation is also evident from the history of origin of “gender ideology” as interpreted on the initiative’s website, where it is falsely claimed to have been created by John Money. Money was, namely, the one to introduce the distinction between gender and sex into the medical and psychiatric debate on intersex persons, in order to separate biological sex from a person’s psychosocial sex identity. That is where the gender debate and the development of the term only begin, as “gender debates over surgical operations on intersex and transsexual persons are later taken over by feminist theoreticians and applied to the issue of power asymmetry between women and men” (Anić, 2011, p. 45). Anić emphasises the importance of the “shift from gender as a set of socially constructed attributes to the concept of gender as an analytical category and a meta category, because gender as such transcends every theory within which it is used and thus eludes any attempt of being attributed ideological contents” (Anić, 2011, p. 60). A press conference held in April 2016 under the title “Gender ideology is a bogeyman to scare parents and children” presented the view that we are witnessing a harmful practice in which “the category of gender is being deliberately avoided and obscured by imposing the discourse of ‘gender ideology’”, which was pointed out as utter manipulation (Tešija, 2017).

The public policy space of Croatia today is contaminated with “gender ideology” which is being imposed as the dominant discourse in addressing the issue of violence against women and in the context of the public policy process of ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. In an open letter to the public published in October 2017 in response to the term “gender” being omitted from the

Development Strategy of Zagreb, a number of women's organisations addressed the impact of ultraconservative groups in society and warned:

*“The Republic of Croatia is a signatory to a number of international documents, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and a member of the European Union. The term 'gender' is used in all these contexts in explaining the numerous discriminatory practices that result from traditional interpretations of the role and position of women in society”, adding that “the ultimate goal of removing the term gender from Croatian legislation is to hinder the fight against the causes of violence and inequality suffered by women.”*

### **Feminist theology as an articulation of alternative, theologically-based approaches to the problem of discrimination and violence against women**

In their message on the so-called “gender ideology” entitled “Male and female he created them!”, Croatian bishops write:

*“In gender ideology, we are faced with a new understanding of human sexuality, in fact with a new ideology of sexuality. Gender ideology threatens the very core of the human being.”*

What the Bishops' Conference find problematic is the shift in the paradigm of human sexuality that we have witnessed since the 1960s, when the “long contested, repressed and suppressed sexuality suddenly came to be liberated and glorified” (Knibiehler, 2004, p. 222). This change of paradigm means that the long-contested, repressed, suppressed and hidden forms of sexuality are now becoming accepted and are challenging the heterosexual monogamous

marriage as the only correct relationship model. In the document “Male and female he created them!” each debate on gender is perceived as promotion of “gender ideology” which, according to Anić and Brnčić, results in identifying gender with sex – a practice that “dismisses the problem of gender roles, to which the Church has largely contributed throughout the history” (Anić and Brnčić , 2015). The bishops’ point, as the authors emphasise, is actually the understanding of the traditional division of male and female behaviour models as God's commandments, which is based on the belief that in creating man and woman God also created their roles in society – and these are, therefore, to be understood as “natural law”.

In analysing sexuality throughout history, Knibiehler deconstructs the institution of heterosexual marriage as natural law and explains the impacts of the social context in the development and shaping of the institution of marriage or the sacrament of matrimony. She believes that marriage had been used to regulate breeding and considers it “a kind of compromise between male aggression and the need to control women, in the interest of reproduction itself” (Knibiehler, 2004, p. 162). She explains the context of a time in which women were mostly dependent on men, and in which marriage served to protect the dignity of women from the liberties of men, but also continues by arguing that:

*“Christian marriage, or more precisely Catholic marriage, is the result of attempts to rein in sexuality in order to direct it towards the function of creating offspring.”* (Knibiehler, 2004, p. 65)

In November 2017 the Croatian Bishops’ Conference sent out a message entitled “Stand up for the fundamental values of family and education”, addressing school education, family law and the Istanbul Convention, in which they state that “all steps must be taken to achieve reconciliation and the strengthening of the marital union so as to protect the institution of marriage, while at the same time giving concrete expression to the statutory obligation of the

State to protect the family”. A more thorough reading of the message issued by the Council for Life and Family in September 2017 also suggests that preserving the institution of marriage is given precedence over the protection of women against violence, in particular where it states that *“preventive action could be directed towards strengthening, building up and revitalising families instead of domestic violence being used as a lever for the destruction of the family.”*

The necessity of violence prevention is beyond question, but staying in a violent partnership does not prevent but rather perpetuates violence. Domestic violence is not a lever that can destroy a family – it is domestic violence that destroys. The new draft of the Family Act proposed a mandatory reconciliation process prior to divorce for the purpose of attempting to preserve the marriage. Thanks to the interventions of women's organisations, which continue to express dissatisfaction with the Act, the reconciliation process prior to divorce will not be mandatory since such a provision would have placed women who have survived violence in a highly vulnerable position and put them in imminent danger. A family that is not based on equal relations is not safe and is at a high risk of violence.

What Jadranka Rebeka Anić, in her book *Women Believers and Citizens*, sees as the main obstacle to achieving equality between women and men in the family and marriage is the dominance of the complementarity model as advocated by the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia.<sup>13</sup> Such a model of gender relations assumes that a human can always be just a man or just a woman who can achieve the fullness of their humanity only in relation to one another and that only together they can form a complete human being. This model was preceded by the subordination model according to which the man is a complete human being and is fulfilled in the public sphere, whereas the woman is incomplete, exists for the man and is fulfilled in the private sphere. Compared to this model, the complementary model of gender relations represents

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<sup>13</sup> "Male and female he created them!" (Croatian Bishops' Conference, 2014)



a step forward, because – at least at the ontological level – it recognises the full equality of women and men. The problem is, however, in the same underlying logical matrix as in the subordination model, according to which the differences between men and women are biological and as such fixed. Biological differences result in psychological and spiritual differences and in different social roles. According to the model of complementarity, women are more emotional and intuitive, and men are less emotional, but more sensible. According to this model, love only represents a part of life for a man, and the whole life for a woman, male sexuality is a biological and female a psychological phenomenon (Anić and Spahić Šiljak, 2009). Such stereotyping of gender roles clearly prevents the achievement of equality between men and women.

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the causes of this kind of perception are found in the way the Church came to be institutionalised and hierarchically structured within the patriarchal society. In the tradition of feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation, the patriarchal society is understood as a system in which a few men have power over women, children, other men, colonised peoples, and is caused by an androcentric mentality that takes man as the measure of all things (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2011). Or, as Simone de Beauvoir wrote:

*“...humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. (...) He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.”* (De Beauvoir, 2016, p.10).

However, the structural violence of patriarchy that is fostered by our learned patterns of behaviour is not only the responsibility of the system and the men. It should also be noted that, in analysing gender relations within the family, Anić and Spahić-Šiljak observe that women adopt gender stereotypes themselves and pass on patriarchal patterns of behaviour through education to their children. It is therefore no wonder for Kniebliehler to conclude that:

*“Women are to play an important role, providing that they throw off the cape of subservience and passivity which has kept them silent for so long and create new bonds of solidarity among themselves and with the most lucid of men.” (Knibiehler, 2004, p. 184)*

It is also important to emphasise that stereotyping of gender roles not only harms women but also men, as Regina Ammicht Quinn notes. Stereotyping gender roles gives men access to positions of power, but at the same time places a heavy burden on them, which is why men in Western countries, for example, represent “three-quarters of all murder victims, two-thirds of all those repeating the same class level in schools, three-quarters of all suicides and their life expectancy is eight years less than that of women” (Ammicht Quinn, 2012, p.20). The presented data, including such that women form a half of the world's population, work three-fourths of the world's working hours, receive one-tenth of the world's salary, own one percent of the world's land, are made available precisely through critical gender categories.

*“Thinking with the help of critical gender categories is dangerous. But it is not so because of the production of ideologies, but because it lays bare ideologies.” (Ammicht Quinn, 2012, p.21)*

This is precisely what feminist theology does when using critical gender theories to lay bare patriarchy as a social structure based on the dynamics of domination and subordination relations, in order to allow the deconstruction of such dynamics and enable us to accomplish radical equality which Christ calls us to in Galatians 3:28, based on the hermeneutical approach of feminist theology and theology of gender.

Feminist theology

*“...sees faith with women’s eyes. It sees what is wrong or missing in the way faith has been presented insofar as it ignores or burdens women. And it searches the tradition for powerful liberating elements that can transform life today. (...) women dream of a new heaven and a new earth, with no one group dominating and no one group being subordinated, but each person cherished and participating according to his or her own God-given gifts, in genuinely reciprocal relations.” (Johnson, 2012, p.27)*

## **Conclusion**

Although the gender debate in Croatia is primarily taking place in the context of creation of public policies and legislation, and is thus being imposed as a political question, it is clear that the misunderstandings regarding the interpretation of the term are basically a matter of opposing worldviews. This is, in my opinion, the reason why the discourse of so-called “gender ideology” was not immediately rejected as unfounded, given the use and understanding of the term in both Croatian and international law. Consequently, I see no possibility of this situation being resolved without a serious theological debate that should emphasise the different understandings of the concept of gender within the Church and reject the interpretation of the Croatian Bishops’ Conference as being a correct interpretation at all, let alone the only correct one. It is necessary for the Croatian Bishops’ Conference to hear and accept different voices – especially those of women – which by all means do exist within the Church. Jadranka Rebeka Anić, a senior research fellow at the Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences and a Catholic sister, is also a powerful different voice coming from within Church. The fact that her work has been recognised in the scientific community, but on the other hand completely ignored by the leadership of the Church, clearly points to the already identified problem of understanding stereotyped gender roles. I therefore find it is crucial to accent those voices and interpretations, which are unfortunately still alternative in Catholic circles. Considering the share of Roman Catholics in

Croatia (86.28 %) and the influence of the Church, it is necessary to look for the most lucid allies in the Church hierarchy and to empower the silent, different thinking believers. As our voices have been ignored by the Church leadership, we have no alternative but to seek alliances elsewhere, for our voices to finally become loud enough no longer to be ignored. Solidary efforts are therefore necessary to expand the space of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary cooperation between the scientific, activist and cultural communities in an all-encompassing battle against violence directed towards women. It is extremely important to note here that the Church is often the first contact point for victims of violence. A Church that combats violence against women is a Church that will take the protection of women from violence seriously enough to assume this responsibility, listen to voices of women and feminists and put the protection of women against violence before the protection of the institution of marriage. Such a Church would cooperate with institutions, the scientific community and civil society organisations, especially feminist organisations, with the aim of providing support and assistance to women and an all-encompassing battle against violence. The hope remains that, in order to organise the badly needed system of protection of women from gender-based violence, we will be able to open up a dialogue and then a space for cooperation.

No less important,

*“Today, in a time of a strong counter-revolutionary momentum of clerical structures and their closely related sub-political movements, the mapping of the emancipatory potentials of different religious theories and practices is of strategic importance for reflection on a socially more just and economically fair society.” (Nikšić, 2017)*

## **Deconstructing the debate on the Istanbul Convention in Croatia: Contribution of Feminist Theology in Combating Violence against Women**

### Abstract

In the research paper *Deconstructing the debate on the Istanbul Convention in Croatia: Contribution of Feminist Theology in Combating Violence Against Women* I am researching the ideological determinants and ways of public and political action of the anti-gender movement with respect to the process of ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Croatia in 2017 and the possibility of contribution of feminist theology to deconstructing “gender ideologies” and creating comprehensive mechanisms for combating gender-based violence against women. The paper consists of the introduction and four key parts: “Gender-based violence against women and the importance of the Istanbul Convention”; “Gender, 'gender ideology' and 'anti-gender movement' in the Republic of Croatia”; “An analysis of public action of the anti-gender campaign in relation to the public policy process of ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2017 in the Republic of Croatia”; “Feminist theology as an articulation of alternative, theologically-based approaches to the problem of discrimination and violence against women” and a conclusion with recommendations. To understand the origin and development of the concept of gender, and the misunderstandings of the concept, I rely on the book *How to Understand Gender? - History of Creation and Different Understanding in the Church* (Croat. *Kako razumjeti rod? Povijest nastanka i različita razumijevanja u Crkvi*) by Jadranka Rebeka Anić. Qualitative methods have been used in the research, including a summary of the existing “anti-gender movement” analyses in the global and national context, an analysis of publicly available documents and reports from international and national institutions and non-governmental organisations and an analysis of media content related to the issue of ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Despite the official attitude of the Croatian Bishops' Conference and the

loud voices of the “anti-gender movement” in positions of power within the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, I still dissociate the “anti-gender movement” from the Church, in order to point out that the Church are also those silent voices who disagree with the public discourse of the Church on “gender ideologies”, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the stereotyping of gender roles, and who can theologially argue their disagreement.

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