

# **Marching Forward with #MeToo:**

## **The Representations of Women in American Political Television Series**

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### **Abstract:**

One year has passed since the #MeToo movement started to spread on social media in October, 2017. This powerful movement has connected women not only in the United States but also around the globe to form a strong alliance to renegotiate women's roles and status in contemporary society in which sexism and misogyny are becoming a rising trend and women are challenged by the threat of sexual assault and harassment in the workplace. In the recent October issue of *The Economist*, a front-page op-ed puts forward that #Metoo "is not about sex so much as about power—how power is distributed, and how people are held accountable when power is abused" ("#MeToo, One Year On" 13). In the world of law and politics, such biased power distribution between men and women is even more apparent. Struggling at the periphery of legal and political fields, women have been challenged by gender stereotypes and have been insulated from power and leadership. Over the past decades, American women have made significant progresses in legal and political professions. In the 2018 election, Sharice Davids and Deb Haaland became the first two Native American women elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. More and more women politicians rise up to seize power, subvert the male-centric system, and, therefore, provide real-life examples for numerous American television series featuring women's advancement in law and politics.

The present article aims to investigate the representations of women in two American political television series—*House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018) and *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-2016)—by tackling one major question, namely, the representations of women and how they deal with the sexual assault cases. In particular, the analysis concentrates on the female rape victims (including one female politician) who have experienced sexual assault, and women lawyers who represent and help the female rape victims. By focusing on the rape-centered episodes in these two television dramas, this article also attempts to connect with some real-life incidents, for instance, the #MeToo movement, so as to contemplate existing problems with respect to women's empowerment, gender equality, sexual misconducts, and social justice in and beyond legal and political fields.

"Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power."  
—Oscar Wilde

"You've got to deny, deny, deny and push back on these women,"  
[Trump] said. "If you admit to anything and any culpability, then you're dead. That was a big mistake you made. You didn't come out guns blazing and just challenge them. You showed weakness. You've got to be strong. You've got to be aggressive. You've got to push back hard. You've got to deny anything that's said about you. Never admit."  
—Bob Woodward

1        Since October, 2017, triggered by the Weinstein scandal, the #MeToo movement “has moved from word of mouth to social media and across the world” with the aim to protect women's rights and end sexual harassment and assault against women in the workplace (Frye, “From Politics to Policy” n.p.). This powerful new social media movement has connected women not only in the United States but also around the globe. In a recent October issue of *The Economist*, a front-page op-ed puts forward that #MeToo “is not about sex so much as about power—how power is distributed, and how people are held accountable when power is abused” (“#MeToo, One Year On” 13). A recent 2018 Pew Research Center survey on sexual harassment in the workplace in the United States shows that there are more women who have experienced sexual harassment than men: “Some 44% of Americans say they have received unwanted sexual advances or verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. About six-in-ten women (59%) say they have experienced this, while 27% of men say the same” (Graf n.p.). To resist against gender inequality and gender power imbalance, #MeToo has formed a strong alliance to renegotiate women’s roles and status in today’s society and has given a voice to those women who have been challenged by the threats or the experiences of sexual assault and harassment. In this movement, women who had been sexually assaulted but had kept silent in fear of public criticism and scrutiny began to share their past and speak up for women with similar experiences.

2        In recent years, television series have become “more open about treating political issues and social controversies” despite their inclination towards entertaining subjects as well as “less emotional and less controversial” topics (Cuklanz 1). Specifically, prime-time television series often include up-to-date controversial subjects within the shows very carefully so as to “avoid offending potential audience members” (Cuklanz 1). Nevertheless, by mirroring some of the most debated social issues, television series serve as platforms for the audiences to participate in the dialogues discussing social and political changes and problems. In *Rape on Prime Time: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, Lisa M. Cuklanz points out that “issue-oriented or issue-based” research with respect to television series is significant in connecting the audiences with “public issue advocacy with fictional dramatic programming on prime time” (2). Paul Bergman considers popular legal and political television dramas as important components of “popular legal culture” which can “[transmit] powerful messages about such topics as the fairness of a justice system, the content of legal rules, the processes by which laws are made and cases decided, and the work and attitudes of lawyers and judges” (n.p.). The television shows’ influence on the public’s “beliefs about the content and functioning of rape evidence” is particularly crucial, as they can create opportunities for the viewers to discuss and

debate about the existing problems both in terms of legal and cultural aspects that may harm the victims again:

rules protecting rape complainants may exist on paper but are of little use in the real world. This is especially true given the breadth and strength of the pre-existing attitude that the legal system is a ‘second rapist.’ ( . . . ) To the extent that rape complainants’ reluctance to report their attackers to the police is due to their beliefs that the formal legal system will treat all rape complainants like them harshly and unfairly, the television portrayals do constitute a third rapist. (Bergman, n.p.)

Besides, as the topic of rape still largely “remains as an ‘unspeakable’ event” in present days (qtd. in Projansky 90), television series which present narratives of sexual crimes break this cultural taboo by “[providing] an opportunity to both observe and question a multitude of societal forces that shape our attitudes, beliefs, and identities” (Bloom 6).

3 Particularly, legal and political television series positioning women’s rights and status at center stage can be considered as meaningful cultural products not only in constructing a discourse challenging patriarchal ideologies and systems, but also in influencing people’s “attitudes about gender, rape, [and] raped women” (Bloom 6), connecting them with social movements and advocacies which aim to eliminate gender stereotypes and bring gender equality to different fields in the public sphere. The present article aims to examine the representations of women in two American political television series—*House of Cards* and *The Good Wife*—by tackling one major question, namely, the representations of women and how they deal with the sexual assault cases. In particular, the analysis focuses not only on the female rape victims (including one female politician) who have experienced sexual assault, but also on women lawyers who represent and help female rape victims. The narratives of rape cases in both series can be closely connected with recent social issues and movements, providing “a unique and important opportunity for the study of relationships between television programming and social change” (Cuklanz 2). Therefore, this article also attempts to connect with some recent real-life incidents, for instance, the #MeToo movement, so as to contemplate on the existing problems with respect to women’s empowerment, gender equality, sexual misconducts, and social justice in and beyond legal and political fields.

4 *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018) is a recent American political thriller centered on how the political couple Francis and Claire Underwood survives, struggles, and strives for the presidency in a corrupted Washington. In particular, the show features Claire Underwood as the leading female protagonist with greater significance than any other female characters in former American political television series. The emergence of such a female leading role like

Claire Underwood is an inevitable cultural phenomenon. In recent years, especially after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, many scholars have noticed the increasing influence of Hillary Clinton as the first female presidential candidate nominated by a major political party in American history, and have, therefore, considered such Hillary-esque character to be an indispensable and unavoidable trend in American political television series (Tally 125). Throughout the series, Claire is not featured stereotypically as “the frustrated striver, the political wife, [or] the unlikely winner” as in any previous American political drama. She no longer stays on the sidelines, watching the male politicians playing the political game at the center of the political stage. Instead, she is given the opportunity to use her ambition and competence to rise to ultimate power. In this way, Claire Underwood fulfils the public expectations for “a Clinton presidency through the fictional representations of powerful women in Washington” (ibid).

5 As a political drama, *House of Cards* amplifies the subject on gender and rape through its representation of women and sexual assault incidents in the political sphere. By providing different portrayals of women living in the aftermath of sexual misconduct, the series unfolds the obstacles that women have to overcome when constantly challenged by gender inequality and stereotypes. In this part, the focus will be put upon two rape victims in terms of how they voice their experiences and struggle to protect their own rights and benefits. The first rape victim revealed in the series is Claire Underwood. In season 2, while taking a live televisual interview, in order to cover up her former experiences of three abortions, Claire takes her adviser’s suggestion and lies about her past, claiming that she just had one abortion as a result of a sexual assault conducted by General Dalton McGinnis, who raped Claire when she was in her freshman year:

Claire: I became pregnant as a result of a sexual assault.

Reporter: Are you saying that you—you were—

Claire: Raped.

Reporter: You’ve never spoken publicly about this before.

Claire: No one ever asked.

Reporter: Can you tell us what happened?

Claire: Uh, it was college. A classmate, we were dating. And it happened on a—  
We had a fight, and he forced himself on me.

Reporter: Did you tell anybody about it, and did he—was he charged?

Claire: No. Because at the time I felt that I was somehow at fault. I knew I wasn’t, but... I just didn’t want to be stared at. I didn’t want to be known as “the girl who got raped.” And when I became pregnant, I wasn’t going to drop out of school. I wasn’t going to let this man ruin my life. So I made a choice. I ended it. (S02E04)

As Claire admits that, in fear of being labeled as a rape victim at such a young age, she did not dare to reveal this experience to anyone at that time. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Claire has made up a false story by implanting the experience of abortion into the consequences of that rape, she is brave enough to seize this chance to mention this incident publicly on television.

6 The show presents a series of reactions towards Claire's candid retelling of the rape and her abortion. On the one hand, conservative citizens harshly criticize Claire for making the decision to abort her baby. Specifically, Claire's honesty about this incident has provoked hatred from the anti-abortion supporters—protests and death threats come to follow her wherever she goes. Consequently, her experience of abortion has, to some extent, threatened her future political career. On the other hand, others, including the reporter, are concerned about whether justice has been served, or what has happened afterwards with the assailant:

Reporter: But if you never told anybody about it, the assailant could still be out there. Can you tell us anything about him?

Claire: I saw him, uh, for the first time in almost 30 years just a few months ago.

Reporter: Where?

Claire: At a commissioning ceremony that Francis and I attended.

Reporter: You speak to him?

Claire: Briefly. Francis pinned stars on him.

Reporter: He was being commissioned?

Claire: General Dalton McGinnis. And for the record, Francis has always known about the assault. He just didn't know the name. And he's been nothing but supportive all these years. (S02E04)

Unfortunately, as it can be seen from this interview, Claire, as the rape victim, could not do anything but to witness her assailant rise to power as a high-ranking military general and live a successful life. When she attends the commissioning ceremony only to find out that General McGinnis, the rapist, behaves aggressively while talking to her, Claire is on the verge of losing control and retreats to the restroom, trying to pull herself together. Compared to Claire's restrained emotion, having finally known the name of that man, Francis is filled with indignation and "instantly wants to have a go at the rapist" (Sorlin 41). Knowing that making a scene on such an official occasion will not be beneficial to their reputation, Claire dissuades Francis from confronting the rapist and convinces him to focus on their political future.

7 This is the first time in the series that Claire's vulnerability is shown in such a straightforward way. In retrospect of that painful experience, regardless of her being a woman with a strong mental state, Claire reveals that she still suffers from the aftermath of the rape, which "has the power to leave a person in a state of imbalance and emotional turmoil" (Daniels 24):

Claire: You think I don't want to smash things? I know that that anger is more than you can imagine. When he was on top of me...

Frank: We don't have to talk about it.

Claire: No, I want to. When he was on top of me, I pressed my hand—with everything I could, I pressed it into his face. I pressed it so hard I broke his nose. That didn't stop him. He shoved the sheets in my mouth. I could barely breathe. Every time I think of her pinned down like that, I strangle her, Francis. So she doesn't strangle me. I have to. We have to. The alternative is—it's unliveable. You should go to sleep.

Frank: I'm not sure if I can.

Claire: Then you should go back downstairs. (S02E02)

While retelling this painful experience to Frank, Claire changes the subject in the middle from first-person pronoun to third-person pronoun, indicating her intention “to dissociate herself from the girl that was raped” and “to subdue this past version of herself in order not to be deterred from her present goal” (Sorlin 41). After years of immersing herself in political manipulation and rivalry, Claire has evolved into a strong-minded female politician who “developed around herself” “a coat of armor three inches thick” (Palm and Stickers 45) which can “[keep] her from feeling hurtful emotions” (Sorlin 41).

8 In spite of the fact that she knows her words will cause a backlash from anti-abortion groups, Claire seeks to take full advantage of this interview as an opportunity not only for the purpose of taking revenge, but also in hope of leaving a political legacy of her own. The turning point happens when she receives calls from at least three other victims who were sexually assaulted by McGinnis during his service in the army. However, most of these women share their experiences with Claire just as a way to show their understanding, and dare not to say ‘me too’ to admit that they are rape victims to the public, not to mention openly supporting Claire, who is, at the time, considered by the public as a notorious and controversial female politician. In this crisis, only Megan Hennessey, a young veteran who has suffered from mental problems after a sexual assault, agrees to make a public appearance. For the fear of further exposing her private life, Claire persuades Megan to represent all the sexual assault victims to speak in televisual interviews, thus leaving Megan alone to face public criticism and scrutiny. Meanwhile, staying at the backstage of this incident, Claire uses her leverage to win the support of First Lady Tricia Walker and starts to initiate and promote a bill which aims “to impose civilian oversight” on sexual misconducts in the military (Phillips 77). However, this initiative is opposed by another military woman, Jackie Sharp, who just succeeds in Francis’s position as Majority Whip in Congress but wants to keep distance from the Underwoods’ political activities. Besides, Francis also objects to Claire’s initiative as it jeopardizes his political objective of “winning the presidency” (Sorlin 95). The situation then becomes worse as Tricia

Walker, in fear of undermining her husband's political career if she endorses his political rival's wife, also withdraws her support. As a result, Claire reluctantly reaches a compromise with Jackie and Frank and gives up both Megan and the bill, leaving Megan to face the dilemma on her own.

9 Here, the fundamental differences between the two rape victims are becoming more and more apparent. As a woman who is mentally strong enough to face such a traumatic experience, Claire Underwood has survived the crime of rape as well as the aftermath of that terrible incident. Also, as an upper-ranking female politician who stands so close to the highest political power, she has the capability to keep herself immune from public trolling and criticism. Claire soon recovers from this negligible failure and continues her promising goal to gain political power and consolidate public influence, regardless of what she has left behind or who she has sacrificed for her own benefits.

Megan: You sound like Jackie Sharp.

Claire: I'm actually working with her now. She is a powerful ally for us to have.

Megan: After what she did to me? After what she said about you?

Claire: If I let the things people say about me get under my skin, I wouldn't be able to leave my own home. (...) I'm sorry. There were political realities we couldn't ignore.

Megan: Do you ever wonder why so many people hate Washington? It's 'cause of people like you using phrases like that. (S02E12)

Therefore, as Megan claims in her argument with Claire, Claire's words are typical politicians' double-talk and are not trustworthy as she takes the political reality as an excuse. Claire's intention of promoting the bill is never as simple as supporting rape victims or making contributions to women in the military. Her real motivation is to use the bill as a leverage to upgrade her professional experience and pave the way for her political career in Washington.

10 Meanwhile, unlike Claire who has been hiding from the public's eye so as to prevent the harsh criticism from harming her again, Megan Hennessey is not strong enough to survive the aftermath of the sexual assault. Her mental state deteriorates because of the trauma of the sexual assault, the fierce public criticism, the questioning from other women in the military, the silence of the accused assailant, and Claire's withdrawal of the bill. Among all these causes, it is Claire's betrayal that has become the last straw and leads to Megan's final mental breakdown:

Claire: I care very much.

Megan: No, you don't. You don't use somebody you care about. 'Whore.' 'Slut.' 'Bitch.' 'Traitor.' That's what they call me, in my mail, online. I wish I had never called. I wish I had never met you. I feel so stupid, believing what you told me, thinking that you did care. I was getting better. You did this to me.

[picking up her pill bottle] Every time I take one of these, I think of him. And the next face I think of? It's yours. (S02E13)

In this conversation, Megan states that the harm is not just caused by the rapist or the public, but also by another rape victim—Claire, whose behavior is just as damaging as those of the former two. Just as Palm and Stickers argue that “[w]hen Megan compares Claire’s violation of her to her rapist’s, it hits home” (49), the fact that Claire chooses self-preservation and abandons Megan alone facing public scrutiny in such a vulnerable state can be interpreted as another form of rape damaging Megan’s faith and hope for life. As “[r]ape and sexual assault are not about sex or a sexual relationship, [but] are serious crimes about power, control, humiliation and domination” (Daniels 23), in this war against the powerful male assailant, both Claire and Megan have sacrificed something they have treasured most—Claire has sacrificed her sense of integrity and justice, and Megan her life and spirit. After a short visit to see Megan who becomes suicidal again, Claire goes back home and sheds some tears for this young woman “who so closely resembles herself,” “who adhered to loftier values than power and wealth,” “who would have fought for what was right,” and who would never live like a normal person again (Palm and Stickers 49).

11 However, as Sandrine Sorlin points out, “Claire’s few tears that were shed after wrecking Megan’s life are very short-lived; she soon regains her no-emotion mask” (218). This short moment of Claire revealing her emotion—regret, compassion, sympathy, and humanity—is soon replaced by her updated plan to gain power and influence. Afterwards, Claire uncompromisingly requires Frank to fulfil his promise of winning the presidency: “Trying is not enough, Francis. I’ve done what I had to do. Now you do what you have to do” (S02E13). In this case, what Claire has been chasing after becomes obvious—as a fundamental Machiavellian, “[s]he has no patience for his failure, not after all she has sacrificed. (...) [N]ow it is time for him to do the same” (Palm and Stickers 49). The trauma of the rape or the guilt of betraying Megan no longer bother Claire any more as Claire has transformed herself into a strong minded woman politician. This shows the ambivalent and multi-faceted characterizations of Claire in the series—“[i]t’s not that women like Claire don’t get raped,” and “in the face of Claire’s ruthlessness” there is “such an excruciating foundation” (qtd. in Phillips 78). These polarizing aspects reflect the ambivalent characteristics of Claire’s identity—she has experienced a terrible and even destructive incident, but she has constructed her own version of gaining power:

She doesn’t crumble at the sight of the man who temporarily stole her power—though she does quiver. She hasn’t forgotten what happened to her or blocked it



from her mind, but she also hasn't taken her attacker down. Instead, her revenge is that she's built a life of power and influence—however ruthless that life may be—and she's unwilling to let this man keep her from realizing her goals. Her silence isn't weakness, it's strength. (qtd. in Phillips 78)

12      Regardless of the unfinished goal of Claire and Megan in promoting the sexual assault bill, because they have revealed the truth, General McGinnis pays the price for numerous sexual misconducts and is found guilty in a court-martial with a sentence up to forty years (S02E12). This short plotline in *House of Cards* depicting the sexual assault case can remind its viewers of the real-life example of New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand's endeavor "to remove the decision to prosecute serious crimes in the military from the chain of command and implement independent prosecutors" (Phillips 77). At the same time, the differences in the struggles and fates of Claire and Megan have "prompted a 'rape culture critical analysis'" in American society. Nickie D. Phillips comments on the Colorado Coalition against Sexual Assault's critics regarding the rape case presented in *House of Cards*:

The organization concluded that while the show should be praised for 'accurately reflect[ing] the lifelong healing process and re-emergence of triggers that many sexual trauma survivors experience,' it also conflated dishonesty (not about the rape, but about the abortion) in a way that likely contributes to questions of credibility around rape survivors. (Phillips 78)

13      Different from *House of Cards*, which is a dystopian political thriller exposing manipulation and corruption among Washington elites, *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-2016) is a legal and political television series which centers more on the everyday work and life of lawyers. In particular, *The Good Wife* can be seen as a groundbreaker which emphasizes women's significant roles in the legal context by staging a woman as its "main character" with "her struggles and triumphs inside and outside the law office"; meanwhile, it distinguishes itself from "the other pre-Good Wife law shows" by presenting "men and women alike" (Baltzer-Jaray and Arp x-xi). The main plotline of the series focuses on its female protagonist Alicia Florrick's growth "to rebuild her life, economically as well as psychologically" after her husband Peter Florrick's sex scandal and corruption (Kanzler 70). As a middle-aged woman who has been a housewife for thirteen years, Alicia decides to rejoin the workforce in order to support her family to get through this crisis caused by her husband's scandal. A new stage of Alicia's life starts when she eventually reenters into the professional field and starts afresh as a first-year attorney with the help of her old college friend Will Gardner. The show features Alicia's coming-of-age story through the development of the plot, highlighting her

transformation from a housewife into a professional attorney with multi-dimensional characteristics and strengths, just as Baltzer-Jaray and Arp underline,

[W]e see Alicia growing as a woman, a mother, and a lawyer. This growth happens as she sheds false and unrealistic expectations of what a mother or a wife should be, as she realizes that her own wants should be important and valued, and as she carves out her unique niche at the firm and in the practice of law itself. Alicia, like so many middle-aged professional women, is rediscovering who she is and questioning the things she once accepted as true. As she does this, we do it too, and many preconceived social norms about women get challenged. (xi)

14 The following analysis unravels the representations of two leading female lawyers—Alicia Florrick and Diane Lockhart, specifically Alicia’s reaction to the influences of a sex scandal and how she and Diane, who is one of the co-founders of their law firm, unite together to assist women in sexual assault cases. Regarding the relationship between gender and scandals, female lawyers or politicians often have to face strict public scrutiny in their career paths and have to make compromises due to the negative influences of scandals, even some of which are related to them but not conducted by them. According to Hinda Mandell, while the male politicians might have some chances to survive scandals, “women caught in scandal have only the slightest chance of moving beyond their catastrophe. Instead, their private romps consume their public office and shatter in nearly all cases their chances of political survival” (35). This seems particularly present in *The Good Wife*, in which Peter Florrick can survive several scandals and continue to pursue his political career, whereas Alicia Florrick is rejected by almost every law firm she applies to because of the negative influence of her husband’s sex and corruption scandal. Similarly, while taking advice from a consultant, Diane Lockhart is counselled not to mention her fiancé’s name in public interviews since his opposing political stance can undermine her chance to be nominated as Supreme Court Justice (S04E20).

15 In the series, the professional world that Alicia has stepped into is inevitably a male-dominated one which poses lots of obstacles for women. Just as Laura Mulvey states that “[u]ltimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference” (21), for Alicia, being a woman means that she has to face the challenge of being considered as the other or the outsider of the legal profession and has to confront different standards and stereotypical views. While at work, Alicia comes to know the fact that her husband’s scandal as well as her identity as his wife are undeniable drawbacks which can block her from making progresses in her career. As a result, she often feels a sense of uneasiness and insecurity while faced with the male gaze, which reinforces “the power relations inscribed within the gendered act of looking” (Woodward 90), and, therefore, exists ubiquitously at the workplace examining and judging women’s behavior.

These unbalanced power relations are exemplified by Alicia's conversation with Diane. On Alicia's first day at work, Diane volunteers to be Alicia's mentor and kindly offers advice on how to survive in this male-centric field:

Diane: I want you to think of me as a mentor, Alicia. It's the closest thing we have to an old boys' network in this town. Women helping women, Okay?

Alicia: Okay.

Diane: When I was starting out, I got one great piece of advice. Men can be lazy. Women can't. And I think that goes double for you. Not only are you coming back to the workplace fairly late, but you have some very prominent baggage. [pointing to a picture of her with Hillary Clinton] But, hey, if she can do it, so can you. (S01E01)

Diane's advice reveals that the male gaze always exists to judge women, not only looking at their appearance, but also examining their performances with higher standards. Comparing this male-dominated profession to a game of "roulette," Katja Kanzler underlines the frustration and uncertainty that Alicia and Diane both share as well as how they, especially Alicia, overcome these difficulties:

The feeling of impotence and frustration by which [Alicia] Florrick and [Diane] Lockhart respond to this quality of the law are, however, not framed by a narrative of resignation or surrender to cynicism. Rather, the characters—Florrick less promptly than Lockhart—resolve to participate in this system, to play, to stand the uncertainties, and within this context, to try to reconnect the law to the values and 'realities' it is supposed to represent. The narrative demarcates their efforts to accept these challenges ( . . . ). (Kanzler 77)

16 The challenges and obstacles in her work as well as her private life have gradually made Alicia stronger and have made her recognize her value and importance. She soon realizes the fact that her marriage and her life are "never going back to normal," and she is determined to work out her own path (S01E01). Hence, in her conversation with Jackie, her mother-in-law, Alicia makes it clear that she is disappointed with herself being a good and obedient wife for the past fifteen years, and, furthermore, admits that it is difficult for her to forgive her husband's betrayal:

Jackie: I need you to forgive him, Alicia.

Alicia: Jackie, I spent 15 years doing his laundry, cleaning his house, never asking a single question, because I didn't think I had to. He took everything I thought we had, and he just put it out there for everyone.

Jackie: He didn't want that. The press—

Alicia: Oh, Jackie, stop it, please. Peter wasn't thinking of us.

Jackie: It takes time, Alicia. Give it time.

Alicia: The only time I have right now is for them [the kids]. (S01E01)

Similarly, in another conversation with an old friend from her former social circle of housewives, Alicia, being more certain about her future and her identity, refuses to go back to her old life and walks away decisively:

Friend: Now that this is over, we should... I don't know, maybe have lunch. Pretend none of this ever happened. I'll call you, okay?

Alicia: You are not going to call, and we're not going to have lunch. And that's okay. It really is. Take care. (S01E03)

17 Nevertheless, the series finale presents a closure, depicting how Alicia fails to fully reconstruct her identity and obtain real independence. In the last scene, Alicia is slapped by Diane in the face as a result of the former's betrayal, echoing the pilot episode when Alicia slaps Peter because of his sex scandal. This time, it is difficult to observe shame or guilt from Alicia's eyes since she has become a real "political animal" who is used to playing with the rules set by men (Tally 129). Therefore, apart from what Alicia has accomplished in constructing an independent life and a successful career, her limitations become obvious whenever she is involved with Peter's political life. As such, Alicia's endeavor to achieve real autonomy gives way to her lies and betrayals due to the invisible influences that Peter has on her life and her future political career

Almost without meaning to, Alicia finds herself on the verge of entering politics. It's a natural next step in her ascension, not just because she's brilliant and charismatic, but because, despite his betrayal, she is still part of Peter's political world. Not divorcing him has paid off. (qtd. in Tally, 130).

On the contrary, Diane, although faced with more challenges and obstacles due to Alicia's betrayal, has been firmly standing with her faith, and, therefore, gives confidence to the viewers who are in hope of a strong female character challenging the rules and values in the male-dominated legal and political fields.

18 Regardless of the weaknesses or limitations that these female lawyers may come across while surviving in the legal and political arena, both Alicia and Diane have had significant roles in assisting women while coping with sexual assault cases. Both of them have offered affable encouragements as well as professional suggestions to help rape victims have their voices heard and justice served as "nearly every instance of a rape narrative throughout the first four seasons of the series depicts main characters working to amplify the voices of rape victims, help them tell their stories, and give them their day in court" (Magestro 145). Unlike *House of Cards*, which puts more emphasis on political corruption and manipulation, *The Good Wife* is a court show which includes sexual assault cases of various kinds, such as in "Affairs of State" (S03E06), "VIP Treatment" (S02E05), "The Art of War" (S04E06), "Rape: A Modern

Perspective” (S04E20), “Outside the Bubble” (S05E04), and “Red Zone” (S06E08). Besides, quite different from the rape cases represented in *House of Cards*, which focuses on the rape victims’ sexual trauma and struggles in the aftermath of the crime, *The Good Wife* offers “few representations of rape victims [that] focus on the immediate aftermath of their attacks” but concentrates more on the court trials (Magestro 164). This is due to the fact that “the nature of the show” has determined that it can provide a different angle, not simply from the perspectives of the prosecutors or other authorities of the judicial system, but from the perspectives of the victims and their attorneys, as “Alicia and Lockhart/Gardner come in to work with rape victims to help them regain control and a voice, to help them take the next step,” and “to amplify the voices of rape victims and force the courts to pay attention to what these women have to say” (Magestro 164-65). More specifically, the rape victims in *The Good Wife* “have already begun the work of recovering and moving on after experiencing trauma,” and have wrested the initiative to control their own lives after “that has been stolen from them” (Magestro 165).

19 Taking the episode “Rape: A Modern Perspective” as a case in point, the following two conversations between the rape victim, Rainey Selwin, and her attorneys—Alicia and Will—reflect a strong state of mind that Rainey has constructed for herself in her war against the accused rapist:

Rainey: He’s not in jail. He raped me and got a plea bargain with the prosecution, so he’s going to Princeton, not prison. I don’t think he should get off scot-free.

Will: So the money, the amount you’re suing him for?

Rainey: It’s going to Rape Victim Advocates. I...just want it to cost him something. I don’t want any... (S04E20)

Rainey: But the prosecutors had a good case, and Todd Brasher is free. So let’s say this goes against me. Then what’s out there is not “Todd Brasher is a rapist.” What’s out there is “I’m sorry for calling Todd Brasher a rapist.”

Alicia: The gag order will only last as long as the trial. Afterwards, you can say anything you want.

Rainey: But it will be out there that I apologized for calling Todd Brasher a rapist. I’m sorry. I’m scared to be in here, but I... I can’t live with myself apologizing for saying something that is true. (S04E20)

It can be observed that Rainey holds a firm stance and refuses to apologize in court for claiming that Todd Brasher is a rapist on Twitter, which is a violation of the gag order. Since giving an apology for telling the truth contradicts her sense of justice and harms her credibility, Rainey resists against making an apologetic statement and is, therefore, imprisoned during the length of the trial for being in contempt of the court. However, although she “gives up her freedom for the length of the trial, she retains control of her own speech, of what she will do with the voice she has been given within the scope of this second trial of Todd Brasher” (Magestro 156).

Rainey's insistence on ensuring that her voice has to be heard by the public and her courage of standing up against what might jeopardize her appeal make her become a significant role model for others, especially those who hesitate to voice the truth and are in fear of paying any form of price.

20 In another episode "The Art of War," Alicia and Diana have both played important roles in helping the sexual assault victim, Sergeant Laura Hellinger. In her appeal, Sergeant Hellinger accuses Ricky Waters, a private security contractor, for sexual assault while she was serving in Afghanistan. However, Hellinger's appeal is rejected since Waters was still on service and protected by the military law at the time of the assault. This case shares some similarities with the rape case of Megan Hennessey in *House of Cards* as they both reveal women's minority status in the military. Also, both cases depict how the rape victims cope with sexual trauma, social prejudices, and legal actions in the aftermath of the crime. In this episode, it is not until the middle of the trial that the viewers are offered some details of this crime by a witness, Sergeant Compton, who testifies: "Yes, I heard them struggle. I think he ripped her clothes, and she kicked him, and then he called her a 'bitch.' A 'nasty bitch,' I think is what he said. And then... she ran out of there" (S04E06). Instead of presenting the "vulnerable and fragile" side of the rape victim after the sexual assault, "The Art of War" showcases a positive example of how Hellinger, with the help of her female attorneys, rises up to express herself and uses the law to protect her own rights, which is a realistic reflection of "what all rape victims really are: people trying to move forward in their lives" (Magestro 164).

21 Apart from the victim's relentless efforts in moving on with her life, this episode gives the viewers a glimpse of how women unite together to strive against institutional obstacles. In the beginning, chances to win this case are low, Alicia, however, still confidently encourages her client by saying: "Let's win this" (S04E06). Also, when the accused rapist denies the charge and directly addresses the victim in an aggressive manner at court, Alicia immediately fires back towards this provocative behavior: "Sir, two things. Don't address my client. And when you do refer to her, it's Captain Hellinger" (S04E06). While confronting the greatest challenge during the trial on whether this crime is a prolonged assault, both Alicia and Diana try their best to find a better approach to tackle this problem:

Alicia: Do you think that he had the same intent at the bar as he did in the office?  
To have sex, or force you to have sex?

Hellinger: Yes, but legally, it doesn't matter. The only thing that matter is whether I experienced it as one attack.

Diane: Laura, you need to stop thinking as a lawyer. We're your lawyers.  
Experience it as a woman. (S04E06)

In the end, even though the case is dismissed due to the the accused rapist being protected by military law at the time of the assault, Hellinger is still satisfied *with* and proud *of* what she and her attorneys have accomplished. The conversation between Hellinger and Alicia after the trial stands out as one significant scene of this episode—their words manifest their strengths even when justice is not served. Hellinger, the rape victim, kindly replies to Alicia’s apology by emphasizing that it is already a significant progress for her to voice herself by legal means; meanwhile, Alicia, when asked about what to do next when the case ends, encourages her client to bravely start afresh: “You start up again” (S04E06). After all, the series *The Good Wife* not only depicts in this episode how the rape victim, Hellinger, survives the sexual trauma and fights for justice with her female attorneys at court, but also presents how she moves on afterwards in her life: “In her, viewers have an example of what can come next for a woman who was raped, even after she doesn’t receive the kind of justice she deserves” (Magestro 164). More importantly, the female attorneys’ work as reflected in these rape cases provides opportunities for the viewers to contemplate on how the institutional systems function “for or against rape victims” and how the social environment leaves an impact in the aftermath of rape crimes, and, moreover, how these episodes of rape narratives connect with the real-life incidents that may exhibit similar problems (Megestro 165).

22 Compared with the bleak, dystopian representation of the political world in *House of Cards* in which upper-ranking female politicians, as represented by Claire Underwood, are obsessed with political power and abuse their privilege to undermine lower-ranking women’s rights, *The Good Wife* constructs comparatively more positivistic representations of female lawyers and politicians<sup>1</sup>, especially in the cases of Alicia and Diane assisting those rape victims who are in obviously disadvantaged positions. The contrast between Alicia’s former status as a housewife married to “a philandering husband” and her status as a successful lawyer helping women and seeking for a political career functions as role model and encouragement to women (Tally 130). In particular, as “a private person, almost always reserved and guarded,” and with “no prior history with sexual violence,” Alicia provides great understanding and generous support for the rape complainants since she has entered the legal profession, as Megestro

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<sup>1</sup> The characterization of Alicia Florrick also reflects “moral ambiguity” which puts an emphasis on the main character’s problematic polarizing identity which is similar to Claire Underwood—on the one hand, Alicia is hardworking and competent lawyer exceeding many other colleagues in her profession, while on the other hand, no matter how saint-like she appears to be, she still cannot distance her from the manipulative and corruptive world that her “villainous” (ex-)husband have constructed around her, as “there is no success without corruption” (Tally 129-30).

suggests, “[s]he seems to understand what they face during the process of a trial, and she works to ensure they have as much of a voice as they want within the justice system” (152).

23 Most of all, all the rape victims or rape complainants in both television series present themselves as courageous, strong-minded, and stereotype-breaking figures challenging patriarchal institutions and cultures. According to Lisa Fitzpatrick, “the testimony of the victim as well as fictional and dramatic versions of it inevitably engage with hegemonic patriarchal discourse of sexuality and gender relations” (83). In both shows, the rape victims are challenged by a legal or political system which is male-centric and male-dominated, and most of them find it difficult to make their voices understood and valued by others. This is particularly evident in the case of Claire Underwood in *House of Cards* when most conservatives ignore her status as a rape victim while accusing her of the abortion instead.

24 Meanwhile, as Sally Burke emphasizes, “a rapist ethic,” which often “blames the victim, not the perpetrator, of sexual assault” and “provides a rationale for male behavior,” still exists “in modern American drama as it is in modern American culture” (Burke 206; qtd. in Bloom 6). Such a ‘rapist ethic’ not only can be negatively influenced by the rape cases which presents submissive women and aggressive men, but also breeds stereotypical representations of female rape victims and male rapists in cultural productions:

The rapist ethic is enhanced by (...) the gendering of sexuality—in other words, when masculine aggressive sexuality and feminine passive submission are eroticized. This gendering of sexuality informs male/female relationships by representing masculine domination as “natural” at the same time, the social construction of masculinity and femininity influences the construction of male and female characters in plays. (Bloom 6)

Sergeant Laura Hellinger’s case in *The Good Wife* present a typical exemplification of how this mentality of ‘rapist ethic’ can influence the result of a rape case and harm the female rape victim. Simply because the text message of the rape victim shows no sign of being threatened before the crime happens, the defence attorney harshly questions the victim, “It doesn’t sound like you were in fear for your safety, though,” and then successfully prevents this crime to be identified as “one prolonged assault” (S04E06). In spite of their confidence and persistence, it is visible that during and at the end of this trial, both Alicia and the rape victim tend to show sentiments of self-blame for having made such mistakes; meanwhile, such senses of guilt cannot be observed on the side of the accused rapist, who appears to be aggressive, dominant, and confident most of the time. It is also worth mentioning that both the judge and the defence attorney are male, which explains the reason why this text message is considered by them to be convincing enough to prove that Hellinger does not feel unsafe when she is being followed by



the accused rapist. Nevertheless, in the episodes that follow, the show presents Hellinger's rebirth from a rape victim to a successful professional woman. Such a positivistic portrayal of a rape victim who has lost her lawsuit against the accused rapist challenges the conventional stereotypical images of rape victims who generally stay silent and submissive "rather than to subject themselves to a criminal justice system that allows one-sided and degrading, hostile and irrelevant questioning" (Bergman n.p.).

25 In conclusion, *House of Cards* and *The Good Wife* underscore the significant power of female politicians/lawyers and rape victims, taking action to voice their concerns and uniting together to resist gender stereotypes, public shaming, victim blaming, and many other challenges in the aftermath of sexual assault. Meanwhile, both series provide platforms for the viewers to question, debate, and reflect on real-life incidents, and can also serve as valuable cultural resources for social movements that aim to make public the knowledge regarding the subject of rape and the protection of the rape victims' rights

because the movement for rape reform has been long-lived, well publicized, and successful on many fronts, resulting in drastic changes in law, courtroom procedure, evidence gathering, crisis counseling, and victim care. More important, the movement proposed a model for understanding rape that directly and purposely opposed the traditional conception, thus clearly challenging dominant ideology with a coherent alternative. (Cuklanz 2)

26 As Carla J. McDonough argues, how gender is featured in theater and drama "is relevant to an understanding of how gender is figured in the culture" (14). In both television series analyzed in this article, the courage of the rape victims as well as female politicians and lawyers in voicing their concerns align themselves with the recent public discourse on sex/gender and power debated during the #MeToo movement. Since 2017 when #MeToo was triggered by the Weinstein scandal, there have been several allegations of sexual misconduct against "[t]wo White House officials" and "three congressional candidates" who have, consequently, lost political careers for their misconducts ("#MeToo and Politics" 37). Nevertheless, justice is not always served since the changes brought about by the #MeToo movement appears to be "unevenly distributed across the political spectrum":

Republicans remain devoted to President Donald Trump, who has been recorded boasting about sexual assault and whom at least 19 women have accused of sexual misconduct. His second Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, has been accused of sexual misconduct by at least four women. The furor surrounding his nomination has become a partisan referendum on the #MeToo movement, which itself has become the defining cultural phenomenon of the Trump era. ("#MeToo and Politics" 37)

After all, the representations of women in legal and political television series such as *House of Cards* and *The Good Wife* produce contexts that the viewers can relate to and participate in, motivate people to think about them, and help people to raise awareness on issues of gender inequality, sexual assault, and victim shaming or blaming. By extensively engaging with the subjects on women's rights, the public can, consequently, enhance some concrete understanding and critical perspectives of gender and equality in and outside legal and political fields, and, eventually, form stronger alliances, marching forward along with women's movements and fighting for a better future for women in general.

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