

# **#MeToo in regional, rural and remote Australia: An analysis of regional newspapers reports profiling the movement**

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## **Abstract**

The #MeToo movement sparked a global conversation and moment of reckoning in relation to sexual violence. The hashtag campaign, developed from a tweet sent by actress Alyssa Milano (though the phrase was originally coined by African American activist Tarana Burke some decade earlier), provided a moment for survivors to share their experiences in a context in which they were perhaps more likely to be supported and believed. The #MeToo movement also created an opportunity to engage in a more productive dialogue about the causes and the challenges underpinning the prevention of gender-based violence. Yet, #MeToo has been subject to substantive critique, particularly in relation to modes of representation within media reporting. In addition, there is also little is known about how the #MeToo movement was impactful beyond major urban centres and resonated in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) locations. This article addresses both these issues drawing on a thematic analysis of 70 newspaper articles from RRR newspapers in Australia reporting on or responding to the #MeToo movement. While the data reveals some progressive approaches to documenting how the #MeToo movement impacted some RRR communities, as well as profiling some of the key challenges facing RRR communities in addressing gender-based violence, the specific voices represented in newspaper reporting, continues to reflect the perspectives of white, heterosexual women. We conclude by suggesting further research exploring the nature of reporting on #MeToo in other RRR spaces is needed to understand the full extent to which sexual violence is understood and represented. In addition, more specific work with survivors in RRR Australia and globally is vital to understand the dynamics and complexities of responding to and preventing sexual violence and the challenges associated with the geographies of speaking out.

**Keywords:** #MeToo, media reporting, gender-based violence, rural criminology, Australia.



## Introduction

The #MeToo hashtag “moment” (Boyle, 2019) emerged on Twitter after US actress Alyssa Milano put out a call to arms to survivors of sexual harassment and violence on Twitter in the wake of allegations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. As is now well-recognised, the response to Milano’s tweet was phenomenal, with millions of survivors and allies using the hashtag on Facebook and Twitter within the first 24-hours, followed by two years (and continuing) of sustained global conversation and activism in relation to sexual violence (Boyle, 2019; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2018). The hashtag movement has been heralded for creating space for survivors to share their experiences in a context of support and belief, and for drawing attention to the ‘magnitude’ of both ‘everyday’ and ‘extreme’ forms of sexual violence, particularly (but not exclusively) in women’s lives.

However, #MeToo has also been subject to sustained and extensive critique, the most prominent of which relates to the initial erasure of African American activist Tarana Burke, who had developed the phrase “Me Too” some decade earlier through her work with young African American women and survivors. Critiques have also been levelled at the campaign on account of its perceived failure to include the experiences of marginalised groups, including people of colour, LGBTIQ+ communities, survivors in the Global South, older women, and many more (Ison, 2019; Kagal et al., 2019; Phipps, 2019; Ryan, 2019). Media reporting on #MeToo has also faced significant criticism from feminist scholars for the problematic way perpetrators and alleged perpetrators of sexual assault, as well as survivors, were represented (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019, 2020; Royal, 2019). These news media representations are part of a long history of mainstream media reporting that has sensationalised rape and sexual assault in ways that reinforce problematic stereotypes about real rape and victimisation and offer simplistic analyses of the causes and impacts of sexual violence (Horeck, 2004).

In addition to these extensive critiques, one major absence in the discussion to date has been a consideration of how geography, specifically rurality, has influenced and shaped the ways #MeToo was made sense of. The #MeToo Rising website (Google Trends, 2020) – which provides a visual representation of Google trends relating to #MeToo – suggests that engagement with and media reporting on the movement has been predominantly limited to the major urban centres in Australia, such as Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, and Perth. Although #MeToo gained geographic traction beyond the confines of Hollywood and other parts of the English-speaking world – for example, the hashtag was translated into multiple different languages and used to advance more specific local feminist agendas (Garibotti & Hopp, 2019; Zeng, 2019) – the uptake and response, in general, has been predominantly in urban contexts. This article seeks to fill this gap in knowledge by examining the ways the #MeToo movement was reported on in news media in regional, rural, and remote (herein RRR) Australia. While some work has begun to examine gender-based violence (GBV) in RRR contexts, feminist criminological and sociological scholarship has typically shared this urban bias. Thus, this article further seeks to contribute to redressing the urban bias in much criminological scholarship (Carrington et al., 2014; Donnermeyer, 2016, 2017; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2008).

In order to achieve these aims, we firstly sketch out the literature on media reporting about sexual violence, before situating our work within the extant scholarship on RRR space and place, and RRR GBV. Utilising a thematic analysis of 70 articles from RRR Australian newspapers reporting on #MeToo, we firstly explore the ways the #MeToo movement

impacted these specific locations, and secondly examine how voices are represented when speaking out about GBV in an RRR context. We demonstrate that media reporting on the #MeToo movement in RRR Australia in many ways challenges the normative historical tropes around the representation of sexual violence and victim-survivors' voices. In addition, media reporting draws attention to some of the specific challenges in addressing sexual harassment and violence in RRR communities. Given the increased homogenisation of the news media industry in Australia coupled with the reduction in local reporters in many regional centres (Dwyer & Muller 2016; Finkelstein et al., 2012) it is remarkable that such progressive reporting and profiling of the #MeToo movement has taken place. However, we also note the absence of accounting for Aboriginal women in many RRR parts of Australia, along with members of the LGBTQ+ community. As such, we argue that media reporting on sexual harassment and violence in RRR parts of Australia reflects the enduring erasures of the voices of survivors who are not white, middle-class heterosexual women. Yet, the data presented in this article is by no means representative of all RRR reporting on #MeToo and sexual violence more broadly. Therefore, we conclude by suggesting that further research exploring the nature of reporting on #MeToo in other RRR spaces is needed to understand the full extent to which sexual violence is understood and represented. In addition, more specific work with survivors in RRR Australia and globally is vital to understand the dynamics and complexities of responding to and preventing sexual violence and the challenges associated with the geographies of speaking out.

## **Media reporting on GBV**

There is now a wealth of research on news media representations of GBV. How news media frames GBV can contribute towards public (mis)understandings of this phenomena (Easteal et al., 2019; Harrington, 2018; Morgan & Simons, 2018; O'Hara, 2012; Waterhouse-Watson, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2017), the importance of which should not be understated, given that a large minority of the population adheres to problematic beliefs about GBV (Morgan & Simons, 2018; Smith et al., 2019). News media can also influence how survivors understand their own experiences. Jenny Kitzinger's (2001) work, for example, demonstrates how media coverage of child sexual abuse can provide survivors with a vocabulary to disclose their experiences to others (see also Palmer-Mehta, 2018). This is not to suggest that news media audiences digest reporting in a simplistic and uncontested way; readers may challenge and disrupt news media discourse, or interpret reporting in vastly different ways (Harrington, 2018). Nonetheless, media reporting is a key site of discourse on GBV and plays a central role in shaping how this issue is articulated and understood, and in driving primary prevention efforts, policy and other responses (Sutherland et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, much research points towards the role of news media in (re)producing myths and stereotypes about GBV in various forms (Easteal et al., 2019; O'Hara, 2012; Royal, 2019; Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). Framing of news stories on GBV can work to subtly or explicitly reproduce notions of the ideal or deserving victim, such as through reference to age, sexual experience, and assessments of whether the survivor acted appropriately (Breen et al., 2017; Easteal et al., 2019; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; O'Hara, 2012). Conversely, those who are deemed 'undeserving' victims may be apportioned blame and responsibility, or have their experience discredited (Breen et al., 2017; Easteal et al., 2019; Harrington, 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; O'Hara, 2012; Royal, 2019). Media discourse can function to minimise sexual violence as 'just' sex, reinforcing stereotypes of what constitutes real rape (Breen et al., 2017; Harrington, 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019).

Following from this, perpetrators in cases constructed as “just sex” tend to be framed as ordinary men, while perpetrators of real rape are positioned as monsters (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; O’Hara, 2012). Representations of perpetrators are further constructed through the lens of race, with Rae Pepin’s (2016) analysis of US media reporting finding that the behaviour of White male perpetrators of intimate partner violence was more likely to be excused or justified compared to that perpetrated by Black men. Sensationalised, salacious, and pornographic accounts of sexual and other violence are commonly documented (Breen et al., 2017; Easteal et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). The tendency to focus on the salacious and sensational points to the centrality of newsworthiness in determining which types of GBV are given media attention. Traditionally, the focus has been on forms of GBV that meet legal thresholds of harm, and that reflect stereotypes of real sexual (and other) violence (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Kitzinger, 2004).

Recent news media analysis has illustrated how reporting can work to centre the perpetrator while silencing survivor’s voices. Breen et al.’s (2017) analysis of a high-profile Australian rape trial, for example, found that news media reporting emphasised the negative impact the guilty finding would have on the perpetrator’s future prospects and his persistent claim that the encounter was a consensual one (see also Smith et al., 2019). In contrast, the survivor’s voice was less commonly quoted, and quotes used from her victim impact statement “served to discursively minimise her experience” (Breen et al., 2017, p.248; see also O’Hara, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2019). In other cases, the actions and responsibility of the perpetrator are obscured through the use of passive voice, with GBV becoming something that just happens to women (Easteal et al., 2019). Recent research analysing Australian media reporting on the #MeToo movement shows that the bulk of reporting continued to perpetuate the myths and stereotypes outlined here, though there was also evidence of nuanced and progressive reporting (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019, 2020). Collectively, this body of literature points to the role news media plays in minimising, normalising, and downplaying the nature, extent, and seriousness of GBV (Easteal et al., 2019; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019). In short, news media forms part of the broader ‘rape culture’ that enables GBV to occur.

However, it is important to note that these problematic media representations are far from universal. Numerous contemporary studies have documented examples of media reporting that works to contest and disrupt myths and misconceptions about GBV, and present feminist analysis of GBV, even if this is typically in a minority of reporting (e.g., Breen et al., 2017; Easteal et al., 2019; Harrington, 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Morgan & Simon, 2018; Palmer-Mehta, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2017). As Breen and colleagues (2017, p.255) suggest, this observation is important as “it points to editorial judgements being made about relevance or perceived news value.” Thus, news media has the potential ‘to interrupt and disrupt rape myths and dominant discourses on sexual violence’ – the perpetuation of myths and stereotypes should not be viewed as an inevitability (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019, p.15; see also Morgan & Simons, 2018).

While the research to date has provided valuable insights into news media representations of GBV – including in relation to the #MeToo movement – to the best of our knowledge, no research that has specifically considered how Australian RRR media outlets framed the #MeToo movement. As we move on to illustrate, GBV manifests in specific ways in RRR contexts, suggesting there is a need to undertake a focused analysis of RRR media reporting.

## Conceptualising rural/regional space

Before we examine the specificities of GBV in RRR Australia, it is important to outline what constitutes RRR space, as the meaning of these terms is far from pre-given. On one level, defining RRR locations seems to be a straightforward task. A purely spatial, or points on a map, approach might suggest that RRR spaces can be identified by their relative distance from major urban locations, additionally characterised by small population size and low population density (ABS, 2001; see also Donnermeyer, 2017; Wendt, 2016). While diverse, RRR towns share some common elements, such as small populations:

[R]anging from 80 to a few thousand people. They usually have very limited access to many things taken for granted: large supermarkets, clothing stores, entertainment, mobile phone coverage, public transport, etc. Many of these communities used to have [Indigenous] missions on the edge of town. (Adams & Hunter, 2007, p. 26)

While many RRR communities may share some of these features, it is simultaneously important not to approach them as homogeneous or stable. Rather, as DeKeseredy and colleagues (2016, p.167) remind us, “there is great variability in the social structure both within and between” urban and RRR places. Further, this seemingly common-sense definition is readily destabilised – as Donnermeyer (2017, p. 120) asks, “what, exactly is meant by small and is there a cut-off point to distinguish what is small and therefore rural from what is large and therefore urban?” Such questions point to the arbitrary and contested production of the ‘rural’. Donnermeyer’s critique suggests that RRR and urban spaces are not discrete or bounded categories. Rather, the boundaries between and across these spaces are permeable and blurred. Distinctions between RRR and urban are further complicated through their entanglement with digital space and processes of globalisation, both of which work to collapse the virtual and cultural distance between RRR and urban (Donnermeyer, 2017).

Notably, seemingly common-sense approaches miss the importance of RRR *place*, which cannot be reduced to a simple ‘point on a map’ (Harris, 2018). Placemaking instead asks that we consider the social and cultural (re)production of a space, a process that is fluid, continually evolving and intertwined with power relations. As Carrington and colleagues (2013, p. 5) explain, rural communities are “not static, ahistorical or placeless”, and we must consider “the interaction between sociality and spatiality.” The “sociality” of RRR spaces can include particular manifestations of masculinity, ideological beliefs “about resilience and self-reliance” (Carrington et al., 2013, p. 5), privacy, a suspicion of outsiders, and a tendency towards conservative political and social views (Pease, 2010; Ragusa, 2017). In the Australian context, we must also understand RRR spaces as ones marked by the ongoing violence of colonisation, with processes and impacts of colonisation unfolding differently across urban, remote, rural, and regional locations (Blagg & Antony, 2019; Wendt, 2016).

## Situating sexual violence in RRR space and place

Research to date suggests that while survivors share many similarities regardless of where they are geographically situated, the specificities of RRR space/place nonetheless shape experiences of GBV in particular ways. As such, the needs and experiences of survivors in RRR locations require unique consideration. We observe, however, that the overwhelming focus of current research has been on intimate partner and domestic violence. While this focus is understandable, we nonetheless know very little about sexual violence

occurring outside of this context, and almost nothing of the everyday iterations of sexual violence, harassment, and intrusion that were at the forefront of the #MeToo movement.

Women (and others) in RRR areas may experience disproportionately higher rates of at least some forms of GBV (Adams & Hunter, 2007; DeKeseredy, forthcoming; DeKeseredy et al., 2016; George & Harris, 2014; Gilmore et al., 2016; Hooker et al., 2019). Numerous authors have pointed out the ways in which the small, close-knit communities that characterise RRR locations can function as a barrier to disclosure, to survivors receiving appropriate support, and to a safe and appropriate criminal justice response being enacted (Adams & Hunter, 2007; Carrington et al., 2013; Dietrich & Mason, 1998; George & Harris, 2014). Some RRR communities may be more likely to condone rigid, stereotypical gender roles, and to hold violence-supportive attitudes (Adams & Hunter, 2007; Carrington et al., 2013; DeKeseredy, forthcoming; Ermacora, 1998; George & Harris, 2014; Hall-Sanchez, 2014; Hooker et al., 2019; Pease, 2010). Geographical isolation also creates substantive barriers to help-seeking and support, with this isolation “drawing a veil of privacy over any violence that might occur” (Carrington et al., 2013, p. 8). Many RRR towns are underserved, and survivors may lack access to local support (though, to some extent, this may be circumvented by access to digital technologies – Harris, 2018) or have to travel for hours to access services often with no or limited public transportation (Adams & Hunter, 2007; Carrington et al., 2013; DeKeseredy, forthcoming; DeKeseredy et al., 2016; Ermacora, 1998; George & Harris, 2014; Ragusa, 2017). Where such support does exist, survivors may be reluctant or unable to access it on account of fears that locals will ‘gossip’ (Adams & Hunter, 2007; Carrington et al., 2013; Dietrich & Mason, 1998; Wendt, 2016), with the small and close-knit nature of RRR areas rendering survivors highly visible (George & Harris, 2014). Service providers and police may be well-known – potentially even close friends with a perpetrator – making it difficult to access support anonymously or confidentially (Adams & Hunter, 2007; DeKeseredy et al., 2016; Ermacora, 1998). Survivors on remote properties may simply be unable to leave, particularly if they lack access to private transportation or money (Adams & Hunter, 2007; Carrington et al., 2013; George & Harris, 2014; Ragusa, 2017), are unable to leave safely, or are prevented from doing so by their perpetrator.

As we flagged earlier, there are also important intersectional considerations in an RRR context, particularly in relation to the experiences of Aboriginal women (Wendt, 2016; though many Indigenous women also live in urban areas). As Adams and Hunter (2007, p. 26) suggest, violence in Aboriginal communities must be understood in relation to “the violence perpetrated on these communities by the colonisers.” For example, concerns about high rates of GBV perpetrated against Aboriginal women (and especially child sexual abuse and family and domestic violence, with Aboriginal men always already framed as the perpetrators from which women and children require white State “protection”) have been used as a thin pretext for the invasive regulation and control of rural Indigenous communities through the Northern Territory Intervention (Blagg & Anthony, 2019). More generally, Aboriginal people’s mistrust of police and other government and institutions is well-documented, while white feminism has routinely dismissed and ignored the voices and experiences of Indigenous and First Nations women (Adams & Hunter, 2007; Blagg & Anthony, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2005). As Tess Ryan (2019) has astutely pointed out, the #MeToo movement in Australia largely excluded the voices of Indigenous women, with the movement instead (re)centring the voices of white, middle-class women. However, no research appears to have considered the representation (or lack thereof) of Indigenous survivors in media reporting on #MeToo or sexual violence more generally – a gap that has persisted since Sutherland et al. made a similar observation in 2015.

Our overview of the literature illustrates several important points. Firstly, media reporting on GBV can play an important role in shaping public attitudes and understandings of this issue. However, media reporting continues to reproduce myths and stereotypes about GBV, even if there is also evidence of more progressive reporting occurring, including in the context of the #MeToo movement. Secondly, that RRR contexts shape the perpetration and experience of GBV in particular ways. This suggests that local media in RRR locations may have a pivotal role to play in reaffirming the norms that support GBV or, conversely, to disrupt and contest them. To date, we know very little about how RRR news media portrays and constructs the issue of sexual violence generally, nor in the context of the #MeToo movement. As such, our analysis aims to provide insight into these questions and to consider how the global #MeToo movement translated into local contexts in Australia.

## **Data collection and method of analysis**

In order to address the research question regarding how the #MeToo movement impacted RRR locations in Australia, we undertook a thematic analysis of newspaper reporting on the movement. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) identify thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” Thematic analysis “involves searching across a data set...to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 86) ascertained through numerous choices made by researchers that require reflexivity due to the subjective nature and interpretation of the data being analysed. These choices include: 1) what researcher’s judge to be a theme/pattern within the coding of data; 2) determining the extent and detail provided within the analysis; 3) the theoretical underpinnings of theme identification – for example Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest either ‘inductive’, whereby themes emerge from the data, or ‘theoretical’, in which the researcher’s specific interest or research questions drive the coding process; 4) in terms of data analysis, a semantic or latent approach needs to be decided upon whereby researchers seek to either describe and interpret patterns within data in relation to literature in order to understand its broader implications (semantic approach), or the “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – are theorised as shaping the semantic content of the data” (latent approach) (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 84); and 5) researchers need to decide how they are interpreting their data either through a realist or constructivist perspective.

Before we began our thematic analysis, we undertook a process of identifying potentially relevant newspaper articles to include in the final sample. The first step involved running a search using the database Factiva with the intention of capturing all RRR Australian newspapers reporting stories that involved or included the term “#MeToo” alongside “sexual harassment” or “sexual assault” or “rape” or “domestic violence” or “family violence” in either the title or body of the article. The initial sample comprised of 306 articles from 25 different RRR newspapers. All National daily papers and tabloids, such as The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph, The Herald Sun, The Australian, The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and other major metropolitan newspapers were excluded from the sample. Articles captured in the initial sample were then narrowed down to the localities in which they were being reported on. In other words, duplicate articles that were first published in major national or international newspapers and then republished in local regional newspapers were excluded from the sample, as were the same articles published in multiple newspapers. We realise that the duplication of articles may also be reflective of the significance of the issue being reported, however, our main goal was to identify articles that were specific to the local context and newspaper in which they

were produced. The publication dates for printed newspaper articles were kept broad from October 2017, when the #MeToo movement was first appearing in newspaper headlines globally, through until December 2019, when the data was collected. We kept the parameters of publication dates broad to capture trends in reporting on topics related to #MeToo, and the final articles in the sample included Opinion Editorials, Letters to the Editor, and articles written by local reporters. Appendix A at the end of this article details the final sample of articles included in this study.

The total number included in the final sample comprised of 70 articles from 18 different RRR newspapers across New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, and the Northern Territory. No articles from South Australia, Western Australia, or the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) fulfilled in the inclusion criteria. Table 1 below illustrates the distribution of articles across the different states and territories included in the analysis. The majority of the articles were published in RRR Victorian Newspapers ( $n = 32$  or 45.7% of the total sample), most of which came from the three major regional cities with the largest population size outside of metropolitan Melbourne (the state's capital city): Bendigo (40.6% of the Victorian sample), Geelong (28.1% of the Victorian sample) and Ballarat (21.8% of the Victorian sample). A total of 15 articles were published in RRR newspapers in New South Wales (18.6% of the total sample), and RRR newspapers in Queensland had published 11 articles on #MeToo in some local capacity (15.7% of the total sample). Tasmania had nine newspaper articles represented in this sample (11.4% of the total sample), and the Northern Territory had six (8.6% of the total sample).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Distribution of articles by State and Territory**

State	n	%
Victoria	32	45.7
New South Wales	13	18.6
Queensland	11	11.4
Tasmania	8	11.4
Northern Territory	6	8.6
Total	70	100

The articles were primarily published in 2018 ( $n = 47$  or 67.1%), with 17 published in 2019 ( $n = 16$  or 22.9%) and only seven published in 2017 (10%) – perhaps indicating the amount of time it takes for global news to have a more specific local and regional impact. Reporting was also clustered around particular months. For example, October, November, and January had the highest number of articles published (11, 12, and 12 respectively), while other months were more evenly dispersed, with an average of four articles published per month outside the peak times. One explanation for the peaks in October and November is the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence; an international United Nations initiative lead by UN Women that takes place from November 25<sup>th</sup> until December 10<sup>th</sup>. It is clear the reporting in October across 2018 and 2019, in particular, was building up to events taking place in relation to the 16 Days of Activism in a number of newspaper articles



published in the Bendigo Advertiser. A further explanation for the spikes in reporting across these periods is the #MeToo movement and its' subsequent anniversaries, although the articles themselves do not explicitly mention this. The clustering of reporting on #MeToo around these dates is indicative of the enduring impact of the #MeToo movement as well as other international initiatives translating into RRR locations around Australia – notably in regional Victoria.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process for undertaking a thematic analysis, an excel spreadsheet was set up to help with the familiarisation of the data, support the initial coding, searching for, reviewing themes and defining themes. The articles were organised in the spreadsheet according to State in alphabetical order. Each article was read twice with preliminary notes recorded to help the researchers identify initial codes. These codes were then reviewed and revised three times to identify and finalise themes across the data set. As we discuss in the findings section, we identified eight overarching themes from our coding process (see Table 2 below). A theme was defined as such based on the tone of the overall article; in other words, the full contents of each article included in the sample were analysed as a whole rather than researchers searching for or identifying a variety of different themes within a specific article. We took an inductive as well as a theoretical approach to identifying themes, and subsequently, we report on all the themes in the findings section in order to present the array of examples of reporting on the #MeToo movement in RRR newspapers in Australia. However, our primary focus is on the theme of "profiling voices speaking out about gender-based violence" guided by our literature review with respect to the problematic ways in which GBV is typically represented in news media reporting alongside the challenges associated with addressing GBV in RRR locations. A semantic analysis of articles coded under this theme was undertaken through a constructivist perspective where we sought to theorise and interpret the data in relation to the specific socio-political contexts these newspaper articles were being written and circulated. We now turn to examine the findings from the thematic analysis of the newspaper articles in our sample to explore more specifically how #MeToo has been reported in RRR news media in Australia.

## **Findings**

### **Reporting themes on #MeToo in RRR newspapers in Australia**

Our coding process identified eight themes about the ways in which #MeToo was being reported or discussed in RRR Australia. As Table 2 indicates below, most of the themes were very small, ranging from two to nine articles in six of the eight themes, however, the themes of "Profiling voices speaking out about gender-based violence" and "Translating #MeToo into the local context" contained significantly more articles ( $n = 24$  and  $n = 16$  respectively). This was partly due to the authors interpreting "Profiling voices speaking out about gender-based violence" – addressed in a separate section below – in broad terms in order to capture the spectrum of voices represented in RRR news media. The larger numbers are also reflective of the numerous ways #MeToo was made meaningful within local contexts through this reporting.

Because of its' size, we broke the theme "Translating #MeToo into the local context" down into sub-themes to illustrate how #MeToo was reported to have impacted the local context. These sub-themes included firstly, reporting on local events, such as "Take Back the Night" marches in both Ballarat (#ReclaimBallarat) and Newcastle inspired by the #MeToo

movement. The Bendigo Advertiser also profiled a local event entitled “Talking Justice #MeToo Seminar” held in April 2018, with the intention of presenting women with their legal options for reporting experiences in the wake of #MeToo ( $n = 6$  or 37.5% of the total sample). Secondly, examples of 18.8 per cent of articles under this theme ( $n = 3$ ) were reports on the campaign #LetHerSpeak, which used the momentum behind the #MeToo movement to challenge section 194K of the Evidence Act in the state of Tasmania to change the gag laws preventing survivors from speaking to the media without court approval. 18.8 per cent of articles ( $n = 3$ ) were reporting on specific organisational or institutional responses to the issues raised by the #MeToo movement, including workplaces seeking to address sexual harassment and regional universities addressing harassment and assault on campus. And thirdly, under this theme, we saw explicit examples of fundraisers put on by workplaces seeking to tackle the issue of sexual harassment in response to the issues raised by the #MeToo movement. For example, two articles (12.5% under this theme) appeared in the Geelong Advertiser (a city located 75km south-west of Melbourne) about the sexual harassment experienced by staff at the “Workers Club” - a popular live music venue. In response, the staff at the Club launched a T-shirt campaign called “don't be a d-ck” to raise awareness about sexual harassment with proceeds donated to NOW Australia.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2: Key themes in reporting on #MeToo in RRR Australia**

Theme	n	%
Profiling voices speaking out about gender-based violence	24	34.4
Translating #MeToo into the local context	16	22.9
Critical commentary on the #MeToo movement	9	12.9
Local event indirectly related to #MeToo	6	8.6
General reporting on the #MeToo	5	7.1
Profiling local support services	4	5.7
Increases in formal reporting as a result of #MeToo	4	5.7
#MeToo linked only as a “related topic”	2	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100</b>

Outside of the two major themes coded in our analysis, “Critical Commentary on the #MeToo Movement” was noted as the third largest collection of articles ( $n = 9$ ), most of which comprised of Opinion Editorials or Letters to the Editor. In the Geelong Advertiser, for example, two editors wrote opinion pieces about the #MeToo movement – although their commentary suggested that the #MeToo movement had gone too far, positioned all men as sexual predators, and that women were lying about their experiences (see Fileborn & Phillips, 2019 for a critique of such discourse). This position was further supported by several letters to the editor. However, other op-eds, for instance, two published in the Daily Examiner out of Grafton (a small city with a population of 19, 078 in the Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales), used the #MeToo movement as an opportunity to criticise the lack of political willingness in Australia in general to address violence against women. One of these opinion pieces went further to highlight the potential negative impact the #MeToo movement may

have on survivors still living with perpetrators whose behaviour might worsen with the flurry of attention given to GBV and harassment.

The next largest theme was newspaper articles reporting on local events that were indirectly related to #MeToo, but the reporters positioned them as timely because of the #MeToo movement ( $n = 6$ ). For example, the Launceston Examiner in Tasmania reported in March 2018 that Tim Winton (a prominent Australian author) was promoting one of his books about domestic violence at the Tamar Valley Writers Festival in order to start a conversation about the issue in the era of #MeToo. Although these articles were only indirectly related to the #MeToo movement, the mention of “#MeToo” indicates that the term may be a shortcut now used by journalists for referencing violence against women.

The theme “General Reporting on the #MeToo movement” included articles that were not necessarily specific to the local area but were focused on broader issues that emerged in response to the movement ( $n = 5$ ). These included articles written about the Gillette advertisement, for example, that sought to encourage men to be the best man they can and suggested that the #MeToo movement might help to shift some of the problematic attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity. Other articles under this theme were reporting more broadly about gender inequality as the driving force behind the prevalence of GBV in Australia.

A further theme we encountered was using the #MeToo movement for the purposes of “Profiling of local support services” ( $n = 4$ ), with a particular focus on the increased pressure placed on under-resourced local services due to the increased demand created by the #MeToo movement. As we noted in the literature review, many RRR communities are already under-serviced and unable to meet the demands and needs to survivors in their local communities. While it is positive that the #MeToo movement has encouraged survivors to seek support and local reporting is drawing attention to the demand for services in RRR Australia, in the absence of increased government financial support this has unfortunately placed greater strain on an already overloaded system.

We noted a small number of articles in RRR Tasmanian newspapers detailing increases in official reports of sexual assault to local police following the #MeToo movement ( $n = 4$ ). This focus in Tasmania may have been due to the impact of the campaign #LetHerSpeak mentioned earlier under the theme “Translating #MeToo into the local context.” One article paraphrased the Executive Officer from Support, Help, Empowerment (a support service in Tasmania) suggesting the increase in survivors reporting could be linked to “reduced community tolerance of sexual assault and victims feeling more compelled to come forward” (“Sexual Assaults Rise”, Launceston Examiner, 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2018). The articles discussing the increases in reports of sexual assault suggest that the #MeToo movement has perhaps made victim-survivors more comfortable coming forward to report sexual assault, proclaiming that the #MeToo movement had taken the stigma out of sexual violence.

Finally, we also collated articles under our final theme “MeToo noted only as a related topic” if they were not specifically about #MeToo but the content of the article was on a relevant topic and “#MeToo” was mentioned in the article ( $n = 2$ ). For example, one article that appeared in the Newcastle Herald profiled a local service provider and activist supporting women leaving violent relationships after her exposure to domestic and family violence in Nepal. The subject of the article had met with Alyssa Milano and the article noted that she started the “Me Too” hashtag, which is how the story was made relevant to the

#MeToo movement. This perhaps again points to #MeToo being used as a discursive short-cut to refer to GBV more generally.

Within the themes identified through the content analysis, it is evident that reporting on the #MeToo movement in RRR Australia captured a spectrum of sexually violent experiences. This is significant because although the #MeToo movement sought to explicitly highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence experienced by women, much of the existing literature and knowledge about violence against women in RRR contexts focuses on domestic and family violence. As Table 3 demonstrates, the majority of reporting was on both sexual harassment and sexual violence ( $n = 52$  or 74.3% of the total sample) with only a small number of reports that were solely about domestic and family violence ( $n = 10$  or 14.3% of the total sample).

**Table 3: Reporting on different types of gender-based violence**

Type of gender-based violence discussed	n	%
BOTH sexual harassment and sexual violence	23	32.9
ONLY sexual assault, sexual violence or rape	21	30
ONLY domestic and family violence	10	14.3
ONLY sexual harassment	8	11.4
Domestic and Family Violence, sexual assault, sexual violence or rape, and sexual harassment	7	10
Domestic and Family Violence and sexual assault, sexual violence or rape BUT NOT sexual harassment	1	1.4
Total	70	100

The broad representation of different forms of violence against women in reporting on the #MeToo movement in RRR Australia draws our attention to the full continuum of GBV experienced in RRR locations (see Kelly, 1988). Reporting on sexual harassment and sexual violence in RRR location is indicative that the specific focus of the #MeToo movement resonates with these communities, and reflects a concern or perceived *need* to acknowledge and represent sexual harassment and violence in RRR locations, given the general silence on forms of sexual violence occurring outside of a domestic and family violence context. In other words, #MeToo has provided an opportunity to represent other iterations of sexual violence in a way that begins to capture the full range and scope of survivors' experiences in a range of different locations, and we now turn to our analysis of reporting on the theme of "Profiling voices speaking out about gender-based violence" to examine this in closer detail.

#### **Profiling voices speaking out about GBV in RRR communities in the wake of #MeToo**

The themes identified through our coding process, content and thematic analysis demonstrate that the #MeToo movement was represented in RRR newspaper reporting in

diverse, meaningful, and specific ways. Moreover, the reporting on sexual violence and harassment has highlighted the need to focus on these specific areas in addition to domestic and family violence, which is disproportionately prevalent in existing research and policy responses. However, as indicated in Table 2 above, the largest clustering of reporting on #MeToo was focused on “Profiling voices speaking out about gender-based violence” ( $n = 24$  or 34.4%).

The profiling of survivors’ voices has long been deployed as a political tool by feminist activists since at least the 1970s who sought to “break the silence” that surrounds sexual violence, with many heavily invested in the transgressive and transformative potential of survivor speech in particular to shift cultural, political and legal responses to rape in the hope that this would lead to its elimination (Alcoff, 2018; Alcoff & Grey, 1993; Heberle, 1996; Serisier, 2018). Yet despite nearly four decades of deliberate and concerted attempts to speak out – collectively and individually – this has not ended sexual violence (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Serisier, 2018). Although speaking out has had a significant cultural impact on drawing attention to the prevalence of sexual violence, there has been significant criticism and backlash directed at many survivors who have spoken out (Alcoff, 2018; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Serisier, 2018). In addition, it has not contributed in any clear way to reducing the number of survivors, nor has it eliminated the stigma associated with being a rape victim (Serisier, 2018, p. 12). Moreover, there are discursive parameters that shape the conditions under which experiences sexual violence may be discussed in the public sphere, and subsequently whose experiences may be considered legitimate when speaking out (Serisier, 2018; author’s work). These discursive parameters have been heavily shaped and reinforced through the way news media has reported on and profiled the voices of survivors (see Horeck, 2004; Serisier, 2005; 2018). As we discussed in the literature review, historical and contemporary profiling of survivors’ voices in news media have typically sought to sensationalise sexual violence and privilege voices whose experiences reflect tropes of sexual chastity and blamelessness. Yet very little is known about the representation of sexual violence in RRR newspapers or the profiling of voices speaking out about GBV.

Table 4 below illustrates the different voices profiled in news media reporting in the RRR articles in our sample, with local support services – be it CEO’s, other leaders or employees – accounting for the largest proportion of voices profiled speaking out about GBV ( $n = 10$  or 41.7%), followed by survivors speaking out ( $n = 7$  or 29.2%).

**Table 4: Profiling voices speaking out about gender-based violence in RRR contexts**

Theme	n	%
Local support service CEO/employees voices	10	41.7
Survivor's voices	7	29.2
Activist or community member's voices	2	8.3
Aboriginal women's voices/experiences/support services	2	8.3
Other	3	12.5
Total	24	100

Given the colonial geopolitical context of Australia and the critiques of the whitewashed nature of the #MeToo movement, we were particularly keen to examine the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences or voices in any capacity were being represented in our sample. However, there were only two articles that explicitly referenced the voices, experiences of or support services associated with Aboriginal women – and these were both from the Northern Territory where statistically more Aboriginal people reside. The articles representing Aboriginal women and support services drew attention to the lack of recognition of the work carried out by Aboriginal women to prevent violence against women, reflecting the critiques of feminist anti-violence work in Australia raised by Tess Ryan (2019) and sought to bolster their presence. For example, one article profiled the work of the Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program located in Alice Springs (a town of approximately 25, 000 people located in central Australia) that began in 2014, highlighting the importance of responding to GBV in more culturally specific ways ("Empowering our women", published in the *Centralian Advocate*, 3 August, 2018). Another article explicitly tapped into some of the issues identified early on in the #MeToo movement relating to the co-option of the work of Tarana Burke, and indeed, was highly critical of white Australian feminist journalist Clementine Ford's inability to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences in her writing in the wake of #MeToo ("So much absurd chatter", published in the *Centralian Advocate*, 26 June, 2018). As we highlight below in our discussion section, capturing these perspectives are vital for drawing our attention to the work being done in RRR communities led by Aboriginal women. This small sample does demonstrate efforts to push back against the invisibility or problematic representations of Aboriginal women in news media reporting on sexual violence in Australia more broadly (see Ryan, 2019). Yet news media representations of survivors' voices and support services speaking out in RRR in Australia remain predominantly white, perpetuating the erasure of First Nations women's experiences and specific needs in addressing GBV.

In terms of articles featuring the voices of local support service CEOs or employees, some of this commentary was around the specific challenges associated with addressing sexual violence in RRR contexts, namely intergenerational abuse, which was profiled in an article published in the *Bendigo Advertiser* on December 8, 2018. Although intergenerational abuse has been noted in the literature as an issue in Aboriginal communities as one manifestation of intergenerational trauma caused by the enduring legacies of colonisation (Black et al., 2018; Blagg et al., 2018; Guggisberg, 2019), its mention here in relation to an issue for RRR Australia outside Aboriginal communities is significant. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which ran from 2013-2017, identified the intergenerational transmission of child sexual abuse as a cycle needing direct and immediate intervention (Wright et al., 2017). No doubt, the challenges associated with addressing a variety of forms of intergenerational violence in RRR Australia call for specific intersectional approaches, including attention to class, race, and sexuality, and requires immediate scholarly and policy attention. However, outside of this specific focus on intergenerational abuse, most articles profiling the voices of those working for support services described more generally the need to believe and empower survivors when they come forward, to challenge gender stereotypes, and the role that young people play in the prevention of violence, rather than the specific challenges that may be facing survivors or preventing sexual violence in RRR communities.

One exception to this broad approach in addressing sexual violence was an article, also published in the Bendigo Advertiser on September 11, 2018, discussing the challenges survivors of sexual harassment in RRR contexts face when reporting or speaking out about their experience(s). Specifically, the support service worker featured in the article stated that:

Workers in regional areas often have less alternative work options and are fearful of losing work if they complain, which makes them more vulnerable and less likely to complain about unlawful conduct.

Such comments begin to draw attention to the challenges associated with addressing sexual harassment in RRR geographical contexts. Certainly, there are substantive barriers to reporting and seeking support for workplace harassment in general, with research from the Australian Human Rights Commission illustrating that the vast majority of victims do not make a formal complaint, and those who do can face negative ramifications such as being ostracised from the workplace or losing their job (AHRC, 2018). However, the comments above demonstrate how these barriers can be heightened in an RRR context, with some Australian RRR locations facing high levels of unemployment and poverty (Vinson, 2007). As such, these representations reveal some of the specific harms survivors of sexual harassment and violence may face in terms of their economic vulnerabilities, and the extent to which local ‘gossip networks’ - described earlier in our literature review - may further stymie a survivor’s chances of gaining employment elsewhere. It is commendable that such specific challenges relating to the sexual harassment in RRR Australia are being outlined in news media reporting, and further research is needed to understand these from the perspectives of survivors.

In contrast to all the other articles published profiling the voices of support services encouraging survivors to come forward, an article published in the Burnie Advocate – located in Burnie, part of regional Tasmania – on November 20, 2017, describes the risks associated with speaking out online in the #MeToo chorus, cautioning against it because it can damage police investigations particularly if they named offenders. The report draws on an interview with the CEO of SHE (Support, Help, Empowerment - a peak body support service and advocacy group in Tasmania), in which the #MeToo movement is described as a “progressive, but problematic initiative.” The CEO suggested “survivors need to find support offline”, and strongly encouraged survivors to report to police rather than take matters into their own hands. Research predating the #MeToo movement indicates that digital communications technologies are important tools for survivors of sexual violence and domestic and family violence, helping to create and sustain supportive communities that are often not available offline (Fileborn, 2014; Harris, 2018; Loney-Howes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; O’Neill, 2018; Powell, 2015; Salter, 2013). However, in sharing experiences online survivors also risk being identified by others in their communities, which may have negative consequences. Indeed, it is possible that “gossip networks” and the “tight knit” nature of RRR communities may ostracise or result in further harms for survivors including their personal safety, especially if the perpetrator is named and well-liked (see Loney-Howes, forthcoming, p. 133). Yet, these risks are not necessarily limited to survivors in RRR areas, and it remains unclear as to how sharing an experience online might negatively affect rural survivors in specific ways. However, as we move on to discuss below in relation to specific instances of news media representing survivors’ voices in RRR Australia, the #MeToo movement has been instrumental in shifting the stigma associated with sexual violence and enabled (some) survivors – regardless of geographic location – to share their stories.

Our coding process identified seven articles published that specifically featured the voices of survivors speaking out about their experiences, and here we unpack three that centre the survivors' narratives in their own words. We focus our analysis on these three because they are the only articles in the sample that entirely feature survivor's voices. In other words, a reporter had not broken up, manipulated, or attempted to interpret the survivor's voice, and the article is in the survivors' words only. This privileging of survivors' voices in such journalist practices enables survivors to construct, interpret and make meaningful their experiences in their own terms without the presence of an expert mediating and validating their experience (Palmer-Mehta, 2018).

In many ways, the themes discussed by survivors in these media representations reflect the broader challenges and logics that sit behind wanting to share experiences of sexual violence regardless of geographic location, with our sample reflecting two key themes. Firstly, the safety provided by the #MeToo movement enabled survivors to share their experiences and in doing so challenged the ways many are shamed into silence. Secondly, the desire to highlight and therefore contest the cultural and social contexts that enable sexual violence to take place. For example, an article written by a local journalist published in the Northern Territory News on October 21, 2017 about her own experiences of sexual violence explicitly sought to shift the shame and blame back onto perpetrators, and in doing so directly intervenes in the victim-blaming discourses that seek to maintain the silence of survivors. In the article, the journalist notes the fear associated with not wanting friends and family to know she was a survivor but nonetheless decided to document all the times she can say "Me Too" to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence. Specifically, she said: "almost every woman I know has been the victim of sexual assault or harassment... [and] it's important that that my brothers, mum, dad, boyfriend, friends and colleagues and you all know about these horrific instances [I had]." The article concludes with the author stating that the while these stories are "shameful", the shame belongs to the perpetrators, not survivors.

Similar to the piece published in the Northern Territory News, an article written by a local reporter appeared in the Shepparton News on October 19, 2017 about her experience of sexual harassment in a small rural town in Queensland in March 2016. She describes how she confronted the perpetrator: "I grabbed him by the collar, pushed him up against the wall." She then said to him: "Don't you ever touch a woman who hasn't asked to be touched by you ever again." The reporter then goes on describe how "speaking back" to the perpetrator made her feel powerful, and that the #MeToo movement has enabled survivors to take back their voices and prompted a discussion to dismantle assumptions that women are not the property of men – as the excerpt below highlights:

It was the first time I felt powerful in any kind of harassment situation, because I was finally taking back all of the times I'd felt humiliated or traumatised by something a man did... However serious the situation...it all leads back to the same notions: culture, entitlement and respect. The #MeToo hashtag campaign has highlighted the magnitude of sexual harassment and abuse, and it showed how finally a group of women were able to tell their story, and be believed by the world, in the aftermath of the Harvey Weinstein scandal. They took back their voices. But this isn't about women taking back what shouldn't have been taken in the first place. It's about starting a discussion that women aren't property, they aren't there to touch, or own or tell what to do.



Finally, an article in the Bendigo Advertiser published on November 24, 2018, described how “Jodie” (not her real name) felt compelled to report her experience of rape as a teenager. Jodie’s comments again draw attention to the power of digital community in supporting and emboldening survivors to be able to speak out. Jodie explicitly makes this connection in her comments, saying that “the #MeToo movement has helped me by providing me support”, from which she could “take strength” and know that she is not alone, disrupting the social isolation and silence that can be particularly acute for survivors in RRR areas.

As we noted in the literature review, previous research suggests that the “tight-knit” nature of rural communities can act as a barrier to disclosure, with these communities often working to uphold patriarchal, homosocial relations that support and minimise the perpetrator’s actions. Profiling survivors’ voices through RRR newspaper reporting demonstrates the power and potential of the support networks generated through the #MeToo movement. Although these survivors’ voices are not manifesting through the hashtag – as so many did in the days and weeks following the movement’s emergence – the cumulative impact of millions of survivors sharing experiences nonetheless provided them with the solidarity needed to speak out enabled by progressive journalist practices. That said, it is notable that two of the three individual survivor accounts featured here were written by journalists, rather than ‘general’ members of the public – and those that were, used pseudonyms to protect their identities. While it is not possible to draw firm conclusions based on this sample, this may nonetheless point to a reluctance to profile the voices of survivors in RRR locations by news media outlets, and those which have direct access to a media platform and significant control over the narrative going out into the public sphere. Thus, at the very least, we must question whose voices have been privileged, and what silences remain within RRR media discourse. Indeed, the absence of direct survivor voices and experiences is striking in a sample of media reporting based on a global movement premised on centring survivors’ voices and experiences. Moreover, the lack of focus or incorporation of a diverse array of survivors, including Aboriginal survivors but also survivors who identify as LGBTQI+, are older, who may have disabilities or even those who live in very remote locations, is evident in this sample. As we noted earlier in this article, the #MeToo movement, along with anti-violence against women activism in general has faced regular criticisms for failing to account for diversity in terms of whose voices are heard, as well as the complex and intersectional nature of experiences of violence. It seems that in RRR contexts in Australia these issues relating to representation are even further entrenched, thus we now turn to discuss the implications for these findings from our analysis.

## **Discussion**

In this article, we sought to examine how news media has reported on the #MeToo movement in RRR Australia with an in-depth focus on the profiling of voices speaking out about GBV. Our analysis drew attention to the breadth of GBV discussed in RRR media reporting, with sexual harassment and assault the most commonly discussed iteration of this violence. Contrary to the almost-exclusive focus on domestic and family violence in current scholarship, media reporting reflected the full continuum of sexual violence in RRR communities, and we call for future research to better encapsulate this. Although we have only provided a small snapshot of the different approaches to profiling voices speaking out about GBV in RRR newspapers, our findings here suggest that the #MeToo movement impacted RRR communities in Australia in profound ways. While many of the voices profiled within newspaper reports reflected broader challenges associated with addressing

sexual violence and harassment, there were some insights - albeit small ones – into the specific issues experienced by RRR contexts in Australia, such as intergenerational abuse. The articles in our sample also gave voice to practitioners and drew attention to the issue of sexual and GBV in RRR locations, including the challenges faced by under-resourced service providers in the wake of #MeToo. Although we have not had the space to explore in more detail the ways in which #MeToo translated into local contexts in RRR Australia, it was clear from the newspaper articles that some local services and activists were able to leverage #MeToo to highlight local issues, such as the Tasmanian gag laws, that until recently prevented survivors from speaking out about their experiences.

Of course, there is only so much we can gauge about the impact of #MeToo and survivors' experiences in RRR contexts in Australia from analysing these newspaper reports. There is little insight offered into the specific challenges faced by survivors, although our analysis of news reports under the theme “Profiling local support services” reveals the strain the #MeToo movement placed on RRR support services to provide adequate care for those who sought help. Although there was no explicit commentary on the barriers faced by survivors in RRR locations speaking out, it is fair to assume that there are some shared or similar barriers for survivors of both sexual and domestic violence (for example, shame, embarrassment, fear of not being believed, or a lack of access to appropriate support services). That said, there are also important differences between sexual violence compared to domestic and family violence (Wendt, 2016). Although we acknowledge that sexual violence is often a form of abuse experienced in the context of domestic and family violence, sexual assault and harassment also occur in a broad range of contexts including the workplace, entertainment and leisure settings, the street, and so forth. Sexual assault and harassment may be perpetrated in distinct relational contexts, such as dating, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers (particularly for street-based harassment). As a result, there may be distinct barriers to disclosure and speaking out that are not captured in the literature on domestic and family violence in RRR contexts. To date, there is virtually no research on experiences of everyday harassment and intrusion in RRR areas outside of the workplace (Saunders & Easteal, 2012), though these experiences were arguably a central focus on the #MeToo movement. It is not possible to capture these complexities by undertaking a media analysis alone, and there is a clear need for future research to address the full continuum of GBV in RRR localities, particularly forms of ‘everyday’ violence and harassment.

Although the goals of the #MeToo movement have never been fully articulated, the collective enunciation of experiences, along with the recognition of the widespread nature and harm caused by sexual violence have to a significant degree been the outcomes of the movement. It is clear from our analysis that the #MeToo movement may have provided survivors of sexual violence in RRR locations with a framework and the safety of numbers to speak about their experiences in the press. However, we know little about how RRR survivors have actually participated in or engaged with #MeToo posts online or the extent to which it has been meaningful to themselves on a personal level as no research has been published on the topic. Subsequently, nothing is known about the specificities of how these survivors might have gained a sense of strength and solidarity from the movement. Moreover, we know nothing of the RRR survivors who were unable or unwilling to engage with #MeToo or those who did not experience a sense of belonging and solidarity with other survivors who participated. While some of these barriers may be shared by survivors across geographic locations, it is equally possible that living in an RRR area presented unique challenges to participation that have not been captured here, in line with previous research on domestic and family violence. Social media is also used in the perpetration of sexual and

intimate partner violence (see George & Harris, 2014; Powell & Henry, 2017; Senior et al., 2017), so this further complicates its use for speaking out publicly – digital spaces are not necessarily safe ones for survivors living in RRR areas, particularly if their perpetrators also live locally. Again, the potential ramifications for speaking out online (or offline) remain unacknowledged in this media discourse. What, for example, happens to a survivor who speaks out online in a way that identifies either herself/themselves or their perpetrator? While their digital networks *may* provide support and solidarity, this is far from certain (Fileborn, 2017; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2020; Salter, 2013), as is the response from any members of the local community who view a digital disclosure.

The question of which RRR voices were excluded from RRR reporting on the #MeToo is perhaps answered implicitly through some notable silences. Aboriginal voices were not present outside of regions where they are already over-represented, namely the Northern Territory, and sought to challenge the dominance of white women's voices and activism who overlooked, ignored, or appropriated the voices of Aboriginal women in Australia (see Ryan, 2019). These critiques are reminders of the continued failure in mainstream feminism as well as in representations of voices profiled in news media to capture the experiences of and challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors and advocates. Further, none of the articles in our sample profiled issues relating to the LGBTQ+ community in RRR contexts or acknowledged that LGBTQ+ communities experience disproportionately high rates of sexual and other violence (LGBTIQ Domestic and Family Violence Interagency & CSRH, 2014). This silence reflects a broader failure of the #MeToo movement to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ survivors (Ison, 2019), in addition to other intersectional concerns. The complete absence of discussion of LGBTQ+ survivors in our sample suggests that RRR media reporting on #MeToo further perpetuated the erasure of queer sexual violence. This silence may have important implications in shaping who is viewed as a victim-survivor in RRR contexts (and, indeed, whether LGBTQ+ people are positioned as existing and belonging within RRR communities), with follow on consequences for the provision of inclusive and appropriate support services.

It remains important not to collapse the differences within and between rural, regional, and remote locations; something we inevitably do in this piece. As noted earlier, RRR locations are far from homogeneous, and we cannot assume that the #MeToo movement resonated in all RRR locations to the extent that we have reported on this article. Although many of our observations noted positive shifts in how the #MeToo movement and GBV more broadly were represented in print media, much of the newspaper coverage we engaged with in our analysis was still from large regional areas on the peripheries of major urban centres, specifically Sydney, Brisbane, and Melbourne. To a large extent, this is reflective of the distribution of population in Australia whereby 89 per cent of the population lives in urban areas, of which 65 per cent of people are located in capital cities (Hugo et al., 2015). However, this may also be illustrative of shifting characteristics and demographics within these regional communities. For example, some of these larger regional centres are reasonably progressive contrary to assumptions that RRR communities are conservative in nature. Many, such as Bendigo (Victoria), Ballarat (Victoria), Geelong (Victoria), Armadale (NSW) and Newcastle (NSW) amongst others, have established university communities, and some have undergone recent “revivals” with state governments investing in parts of regional Australia to encourage “tree changes” and boosting local economies (Wear, 2012; Wheeler & Lang, 2001). There has also been a concerted effort in the state of Victoria to establish regional co-located multidisciplinary centres for responding to sexual violence that incorporate police, hospital forensic teams, and support services

(<https://www.police.vic.gov.au/sexual-offences-and-child-abuse-investigation-teams#multidisciplinary-centres>, see also Hooker et al., 2019). The changing makeup of RRR Australia, combined with increased efforts to address GBV in regional locations may be resulting in a shift in attitudes about GBV within parts of RRR Australia, further supported by specialist reporters located in these areas who are able to appropriately represent the challenges and complexities associated with sexual violence - and present these as important local issues. Nonetheless, future research ought to consider unpacking how survivors' experience speaking out across different RRR contexts to consider the dynamics of larger regional localities as well as smaller and more remotely located communities - something a media analysis alone cannot capture.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated the ways the #MeToo movement was made meaningful in RRR Australia through a thematic analysis of 70 articles from RRR newspapers reporting on the #MeToo movement. Our analysis and discussion were positioned in relation to the literature on the problematic ways sexual violence and survivors are routinely represented newspapers, aligning this with the challenges associated with addressing GBV in RRR areas. Overall, our analysis demonstrated a progressive approach to reporting on sexual violence and harassment, with the sample illustrating a variety of different ways the movement was made meaningful and impactful in local contexts. For example, journalists reported on local activist campaigns inspired by the #MeToo movement as well as documented an increase in the formal reporting of sexual violence and harassment. Our findings section more specifically investigated the profiling of voices speaking out about GBV in RRR newspapers. We noted that examples of voices speaking out about GBV sought to connect their discussions and perspectives to broader, non-geography specific claims about gender inequality and to challenge the stigma and shame that accompanies sexual violence, rather than discuss the specificities associated with responding to sexual harassment and violence in RRR Australia. However, there *were* mentions of geography-specific issues associated with addressing sexual violence in these locales, such as intergenerational abuse and sexual harassment represented in these media reports. Although these examples were only mentioned briefly in two articles we analysed, their appearance demonstrates that there are indeed specific challenges in RRR communities that require immediate research and policy attention that pays particular attention to the intersections between workplace harassment, geographic location, family networks, poverty/socio-economic status, and race. Further research is needed to explore and unpack these issues in order to more fully understand the challenges and complexities of sexual violence and harassment in RRR locations not just in Australia but globally; using the #MeToo movement as a starting point may prove fruitful in engaging survivors in RRR locations.

Although this article has demonstrated that the #MeToo movement has to some degree been able to transcend the urban-regional/rural divide in Australia, the profiling of voices speaking out about GBV continues to be those who are mostly white, heterosexual women. This continual failure to account for and represent diverse experiences in mainstream discussions about sexual violence (and GBV more broadly) perpetuates the neo-colonial erasure of Aboriginal survivors' voices and the tireless efforts of support services run by Aboriginal women (Ryan, 2019). The lack of attention given to LGBTQ+ voices and experiences was also missing from our analysis of RRR newspaper articles. As such, the voices profiled in news media reporting on the #MeToo movement in RRR Australia have entrenched the investment in the voices of white, young, heterosexual women, also reflected

within mainstream support services in these regions. Yet, as we have flagged throughout, there are limitations to the study design and sample, and we do not suggest that the findings presented here are generalisable. Qualitative research with survivors from RRR areas is clearly required to provide an in-depth understanding of the barriers to and complexities of speaking out, and to give voice to the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups who are less likely to be featured in news media reporting. Nonetheless, the media analysis conducted in the present study provides important initial insights into how the #MeToo movement itself was understood, translated within, and made meaningful in RRR communities in Australia.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> As we noted in the literature review, defining “regional, rural and remote” contexts can be quite difficult and in the Australian context can be defined based on population, postcodes, and proximity to capital cities (Harkness et al., 2015). Because of their small population numbers, all of Tasmania and the Northern Territory are considered part of “regional, rural or remote” Australia, and we have subsequently retained articles from state capitals and other major urban centres in these areas as a result.

<sup>2</sup> NOW Australia was an organisation was established in the wake of #MeToo to provide support to survivors of workplace harassment. It faced significant critique in relation to its politics, failure to provide tangible support to survivors, and financial operations, and no longer exists (see Ryan & Rushton, 2019).

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**Appendix A: Final sample of articles used in analysis**

Location (State and town/city)	Newspaper	Title of article	Date published	Author (where listed)
<b>New South Wales</b>				
Grafton	Daily Examiner	Forget the token day, talk the talk	21/11/2018	Lesley Apps (op-ed)
Grafton	Daily Examiner	Land of hope and despair	18/12/2018	Lesley Apps (op-ed)
Grafton	Daily Examiner	No.10	8/12/2018	Nav Navratil
Wollongong	Illawarra Mercury	Figtree HS' crucial role in the first Australian Women's Day	22/09/2018	Agron Latifi
Newcastle	Newcastle Herald	The founder of Got Your Back Sista is on a mission to empower women	2/11/2019	Jade Lazarevic
Newcastle	Newcastle Herald	One year on: Respect. Now. Always	2/08/2018	Professor Liz Burd
Newcastle	Newcastle Herald	Australian women and equality: the way forward	24/05/2018	Robyn Considine
Newcastle	Newcastle Herald	Same rage after Harvey and Eurydice	26/10/2018	Author unknown
Newcastle	Newcastle Herald	Hunter women at Reclaim the Night march demand right to live free from fear and violence	27/10/2018	Helen Gregory
Newcastle	Newcastle Herald	Maq lets her emotions run free	3/03/2018	Author unknown
Wagga Wagga	Wagga Daily Advertiser	Wagga academic labels attitudes to domestic violence 'depressing'	5/12/2018	Annie Lewis
Wagga Wagga	Wagga Daily Advertiser	Rise of the 'unwanted kiss': Wagga businesswomen speaks on boundaries	7/09/2019	Jessica McLaughlin
Wagga Wagga	Wagga Daily Advertiser	#MeToo is more than a social media trend	18/01/2018	Opinion piece
<b>Northern Territory</b>				
Alice Springs	Centralian Advocate	Empowering our women	3/08/2018	Leah Brahman
Alice Springs	Centralian Advocate	Worthy of so much more	2/03/2018	Dianna Newham
Alice Springs	Centralian Advocate	So much absurd chatter	26/06/2018	Warren Mudine (op-ed)
Darwin	Northern Territory News	Survivors forced to relive the nightmare	14/07/2018	Jason Walls
Darwin	Northern Territory News	Shame on the perpetrators	21/10/2017	Jill Poulsen
Darwin	Northern Territory News	Campaign to change NT laws gets US celebrity boost	10/11/2018	Nina Funnel

**#MeToo in regional, rural and remote Australia: An analysis of regional newspapers reports profiling the movement – Loney-Howes and Fileborn**

<b>Queensland</b>				
Fraser Coast	Fraser Coast Chronical	Shame and fear silence victims	10/05/2018	Sherele Moody
Bundaberg	NewsMail	Sharp message for men	17/01/2019	Sarah Steger
Sunshine Coast	Sunshine Coast Daily	Ugly truth: rape is not a beauty pageant	12/10/2019	Sherele Moody
Sunshine Coast	Sunshine Coast Daily	More Coast men seek support to heal from sexual violence	5/05/2018	Sherele Moody
Sunshine Coast	Sunshine Coast Daily	It's about more than money	21/10/2017	Author unknown
Toowoomba	The Toowoomba Chronicle	New digital billboard in heart of the city	16/01/2018	Author unknown
Gympie	The Gympie Times	More Gympie blokes seek help to heal from sexual violence	3/05/2018	Sherele Moody
Townsville	Townsville Bulletin	Too terrified to tell police	4/05/2018	Sherele Moody
Townsville	Townsville Bulletin	Townsville Bulletin Uni vows to call out sex crime	20/11/2018	Author unknown
Townsville	Townsville Bulletin	Toxic attitude is an injustice to masculinity	22/01/2019	Stefan Aeberhard (opinion piece)
Townsville	Townsville Bulletin	Finally reprieve from witch hunt	13/01/2018	William Ross (opinion piece)
<b>Tasmania</b>				
Bernie	Bernie Advocate	Power to sexual crime victims	21/10/2019	Adam Holmes
Bernie	Bernie Advocate	Harassment and shared online	20/11/2017	Imogen Elliott
Bernie	Bernie Advocate	Rise in sexual assault victims, report states	26/01/2018	Matt Maloney
Launceston	Launceston Examiner	National approach needed on sexual assault	26/01/2018	Author unknown
Launceston	Launceston Examiner	change to 194K Welcomed	21/10/2019	Adam Holmes
Launceston	Launceston Examiner	Rise in sexual assault victims, report says	26/01/2018	Matt Maloney
Launceston	Launceston Examiner	Tim Winton to host workshop on "toxic masculinity" in Launceston	23/03/2018	Caitlin Jarvis
Launceston	Launceston Examiner	Modern-day feminism at Zonta	14/04/2018	Caitlin Jarvis
<b>Victoria</b>				
Ballarat	Ballarat Courier	New organisation combats sexual harassment in the workplace	4/02/2019	Rochelle Kirkham
Ballarat	Ballarat Courier	Online campaign shows magnitude of sexual violence in Ballarat	21/10/2017	Victoria Stone-Meadows
Ballarat	Ballarat Courier	Debate over Picasso's moral view	24/02/2019	Caleb Cluff
Ballarat	Ballarat Courier	Dissecting respectful relationships on stage	7/07/2018	Ashleigh McMillan
Ballarat	Ballarat Courier	Family violence survivor Stacey Speaks to shine light on dark shadows	29/08/2018	Melanie Whelan
Ballarat	Ballarat Courier	The women helping to push for parity in Ballarat	7/03/2018	Melanie Whelan

**International Journal of Rural Criminology, Volume 5, Issue 2 (September), 2020**

Ballarat	Ballarat Courier	Police and rainbow organisers meet before festival kicks off	22/01/2018	Author unknown
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Share stories of #MeToo in central Victoria	7/12/2019	Tara Cosoleto
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Experts urge courage	25/11/2019	Emma D'Agostino
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	'Call it out': Violence prevention experts urge action on gender equality	25/11/2019	Emma D'Agostino
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Survivor says #MeToo: global movement prompts disclosures	24/11/2018	"Jodie"
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Call for reform to deal with workplace sexual harassment	12/09/2018	Tom O'Callaghan
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Meet the workers bringing hope to sexual assault survivors	8/12/2018	Emma D'Agostino
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	#MeToo at the heart of Talking Justice discussions in Bendigo	21/04/2018	Adam Holmes
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Hear, believe, support: act to eliminate gender-based violence	24/11/2018	Emma D'Agostino
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Serious obstacles between women and justice	18/05/2018	
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	To reach our full potential	25/11/2018	Julie Oberin (CEO Annie North Inc)
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	More disclosures possibly behind sex offence rise in Bendigo	25/09/2018	Natalie Croxon
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Confronting child sexual abuse through theatre	3/04/2019	Emma D'Agostino
Bendigo	Bendigo Advertiser	Black gowns at the Golden Globes a power statement, says Chief	6/01/2018	Natalie Croxon
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	Addy readers have their say - letters and texts	21/02/2018	Members of the public
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	Find a balance	23/02/2018	Peter Moore (op-ed)
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	#MeToo failure	16/11/2018	Peter Moore (op-ed)
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	Workers taking a stand	29/01/2019	Olivia Shying
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	Name and shame a dangerous game	17/02/2018	Karen Matthews (op-ed)
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	My say on Saturday	5/10/2019	Karen Matthews (op-ed)
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	Deakin expert: Hollywood sex saga will change our workplaces	7/11/2017	Jaimee Wilkens
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	Turning trauma around	29/01/2019	Editorial (author unnamed)
Geelong	Geelong Advertiser	A show of respect	20/03/2018	Chris Mackey
Shepparton	Shepparton News	Womenneedtoberespected	19/10/2017	Rhiannon Tuffield
Warrnambool	The Warrnambool Standard	MeToo gives women strength in numbers against sexual harassment	14/10/2017	Clare Quirk
Warrnambool	The Warrnambool Standard	Women to unite in song for Winter Weekends concert	24/05/2018	Madeline McNeil





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