

Islamic Feminism in Bosnia: Fatima Mernissi's Call for Another Peace

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Abstract – The paper shows the potential for cultural innovation of Islamic feminism as proposed by Fatima Mernissi in the specific post-war context of contemporary Bosnia. The specific historical experience of Bosnian Islam in the twentieth century has to be taken into account. The transformative potential of Islamic feminism reaches from a renewed sense of agency for Bosniak Muslim women to the questioning of exclusionary ethnonationalist discourses and the possibility to empower victims of rape and violence in their healing process. At a deeper level, Islamic feminism may contribute to solve the fundamental paradox of the Bosniak nation attempting to defend the multiethnic essence of Bosnia.

1. Introduction

In this article, I would like to offer a framework to contextualize Islamic feminism in Bosnia¹, adopting two complementary perspectives: the view «from above» of major historical and political processes as seen by the social sciences, and the perspective «from below», of persons living their religion in everyday life, provided by ethnography².

I believe that Islamic feminism as proposed, among others, by Fatima Mernissi³ may be able to address a number of problems and dilemmas of contemporary Bosnia, giving a renewed impulse for women's agency within the public sphere, in both secular and religious contexts; offering a long-term positive response to the scars left by violence and war among

¹ The official name of the country is Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this article, however, I will use the common name «Bosnia» for both the Republic within the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and the independent successor state.

² E. Helms - X. Bougarel - G. Duijzings (eds.), *The New Bosniak Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, London - New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 23.

³ Among the most relevant Mernissi's books, see at least F. Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993.

Bosniak⁴ women and for all citizens of Bosnia; and encouraging a positive evolution of religious identity, moving away from ethnonationalist exclusivity and promoting dialogue and mutual understanding in the country.

It might not be inappropriate to start with a personal remark. I belong to a generation of European peace scholars and activists profoundly touched by the experience of the wars of Yugoslav succession and the rise of separatist ethnonational identities that fueled and accompanied them. In former Yugoslavia, I met courageous individuals and groups trying a different path out of politically manipulated «ethnic» division, violence, and outright genocide.

In this situation, political support and sympathy went to the individuals and communities targeted for their identity, to the most vulnerable, and to those who were actively engaged in a politics of peaceful coexistence among all communities in this newly independent country ravaged by war. Often, those voices and life stories belonged to the Bosniak community. And more often than not, it was women's life stories, women's voices, and women's agency to search and struggle for a peaceful future after the descent into violence. Approaching Zilka Spahić Šiljak's reflection on feminist Islam in present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina therefore encourages me to review this recent past in a new light.

In the following pages I will thus offer some contextual reflection on Spahić Šiljak's text, first by sketching out the social and political dimension of Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina in recent history. I will then illustrate some of the consequences of the war in 1992-1995, lasting to these days, and offer examples of peace work in the country, where women have played an essential role. I will conclude with some indications for furthering peace that we can learn from the Islamic feminism perspective elaborated by Fatima Mernissi and its reception by scholars, activists and women believers in Bosnia, well represented by Zilka Spahić Šiljak. Her message points at new possibilities for a peaceful future in Bosnia, the region and Europe as a whole, which is worth attention and support.

⁴ In this paper, I will adopt the use of names as in Bougarel, using Muslim (with a capital «M») to indicate the community of Islamic heritage in Bosnia (secular or devote) until the early 1990s, when the word «Bosnjak» has come into official use to indicate this distinct ethnonational group (see X.Bougarel, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina*).

2. Religion, society, and the State

Religion is a complex human phenomenon, which can be understood from different angles. First of all, it belongs to the realm of direct experience by individuals, their own life world and their specific way of making sense of human existence. Religion can be the subject of theological reflection, discussing faith, ethics, and related social norms. Finally, religion can be seen as a sociological phenomenon characterized by a specific sphere of cultural production – texts, symbols, rituals, and institutions – shaping bonds across individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole. Insofar as it produces a sense of collective identity, religion can become an important element in shaping the self-image of an ethnic group or nation and its polity, i.e. the general institutional and value framework in which political life unfolds.

In all three dimensions, religious discourse has an important gender component, providing for ethical principles, forms of socialization, and role models for women and men, both in private and in public, and particularly in the key events of human existence – birth, marriage, and death.

Collective identities, including religious communities, are the result of historical processes rather than an essential trait of a group. In a time-span of several centuries, it is possible to observe how religious communities arise, flourish, change and sometimes wither away, due to political factors enabling or constraining their life, cultural changes, such as conversion, assimilation, secularization, and so forth. These processes of change shape and are shaped by the gender dimension: the changing role and voice of women in society affects the religious dimension, and their agency in the specific domain of religion influences religion and its role in society.

As we shall see, in the case of the Muslim - Bosniak people in Bosnia-Herzegovina considering religion as a historical construct does not constitute just an abstract sociological concept, but represents an essential premise to understand the changes in collective identity and social practices characterizing Bosnian Islam in the past. It is from this heritage that the «imagined community»⁵ of Bosniaks arises and consolidates.

⁵ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London - New York, Verso Books, 2006.

3. Muslim community, women, and society in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1945-1995

Over the four hundred years during which Bosnia was part of the Ottoman Empire, a «Bosnian Islam», with a distinct identity and cultural traits gradually emerged. Its roots lie in the relatively quick conversion of broad sectors of Bosnian society to Islam during the Ottoman period.

Characteristically, historical debates on the nature of the conversion to Islam and the «original» characters of Bosnian Muslims have often been influenced by nationalistic discourses. Muslim-Bosniak traditional interpretation of their historical roots supported the thesis that the converts came from the heretical Bosnian Church, a Christian denomination with Manichean elements. All these theories about the historical development of ethnoreligious communities in Bosnia are not supported by much evidence. What is clear is that Bosnia has a tradition of religious independence dating back to the Middle Ages, little presence of organized Christian Churches and fluid confessional definitions, with strong syncretic elements. All these factors may help explain the conversion to Islam of broad sectors of society that took place in the first century of the Ottoman domination.

Turning to the recent past, it is important to highlight some key aspects of the Muslim population group within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The state arose within the boundaries of pre-war Yugoslavia, the «Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes» after successfully liberating itself from Nazi-fascist occupation. Tito, the leader of the Communist partisan movement, was the charismatic personality who shaped the country after the end of the war. Key elements of the State were its socialist ideology and distinct political profile of neutrality in the international system. The state was organized as a federation, and the Republics had ample autonomy.

For many Bosnians, ethnoreligious identification played a minor role in everyday life in socialist Yugoslavia. The secularization of Bosnian Muslims had already started in the late nineteenth century, when Bosnia became *de facto* a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire⁶. Over four and a half decades after the Second World War, marriages between members of different groups became normal in major cities, a «Yugoslav» sense

⁶ I. Banac, *Bosnian Muslims: From Religious Community to Socialist Nationhood and Postcommunist Statehood, 1918-1992*. in M. Pinson (ed.), *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Their historic development from the Middle Ages to the Dissolution of Yugoslavia*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 129-153, here p. 134.

of national identification emerged, young people often did not know to which religious group their family belonged⁷.

The public space in Yugoslavia was areligious or rather discouraged religion altogether. State institutions and public education conveyed a message of Yugoslav superordinate identity encompassing all ethnic groups. In the early 1950s, a number of state decisions affected the Muslim Bosnians, limiting the public display of Islamic rituals and practices.

By the mid-1960s, the trend had reversed. While still marginalizing the public display of religious symbols, the position and political influence of Bosnian Muslims were strengthened by their recognition in 1968 as a *narod*, a constitutive nation of the country, alongside Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. In the 1971 census, 1,482,430 Bosnians, close to 40% of the population, declared themselves as «ethnic Muslims». The consolidation of the «Muslim nation» in socialist Yugoslavia was accompanied by a renewal of religious life at institutional level: the new Institute for Islamic Studies opened in 1977, and the first *madrassa* (Islamic school) for women in 1978⁸.

A further development in favor of Yugoslav Muslims was the creation, in the late 1950s, of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): a group of States, mainly from the global South, advocating the end of neo-colonialism and autonomy from both the USA and the USSR. Yugoslavia was the only European country participating in the group, and Yugoslav head of state Tito was among its leaders. Many members of the NAM were Muslim countries, and when Belgrade hosted the founding conference of the Movement in 1961, Yugoslav Muslim leaders and organizations were actively involved in hosting Muslim participants, organizing religious events, and the like. For Bosnian Muslims the birth of NAM also offered new possibilities to travel, study, and work abroad.

This new opening to a number of friendly countries also gave a new meaning to the *hajj*, the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca that devout Muslims undertake at least once in their lifetime. There are accounts of Bosnian women undertaking the journey to Mecca on their own, implying a manifestation of both religious belief and agency⁹.

⁷ T. Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 3-4.

⁸ Z. Spaić Šiljak, *The Confluence of Islamic Feminism and Peacebuilding: Lessons from Bosnia*, in «Samyukta: A Journal of Gender & Culture», 17, 2017, 1, pp. 165-181, here p. 166.

⁹ D. Henig - M. Razsa, *New Borders, Old Solidarities: (Post-) Cold War Genealogies of Mobility along the «Balkan Route»*, in P. Stubbs (ed.), *Socialist Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned Movement*, Montréal QC, McGill-Queens' University Press, 2022.

4. Women and Islam in Bosnia in the Socialist era

Like in so many other places, cultural contexts and historical periods, the voice and stories of women of the Bosnian Muslim community have been largely ignored in a society which was organized along patriarchal lines. Until the 1990s, recognized public figures among Bosnian Muslims, both religious and secular, were practically without exception males¹⁰.

It is important to highlight the differences between official Islam in the urban centers and everyday religious practice and embodied ethnoreligious identities in the countryside. Muslim population in the cities was much more influenced by secularization and the spread of socialist culture. In small villages, the role of women in the Muslim community and their identification with faith and Muslim traditions were very different.

We have a precious account of pre-war everyday life of Muslim communities in rural Bosnia: In 1995, Norwegian anthropologist Tone Bringa published an in-depth account of a Muslim community in a mixed Croat-Bosniak village. Her work transpired a keen interest and sympathy towards this community. In the village, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks live side by side, interact on a daily basis, have their own codes of mutually recognizing each other and paying respect to each other's cultural heritage, while at the same time cultivating the sense of a distinction between «us» and «you». Contacts with Catholic Croats were frequent and usually courteous, the differences in lifestyle, custom and value orientation were routinely commented as the way «we» do things opposed to the way «you» do things, sometimes jokingly so.

Practicing Islam in rural Bosnia marked a difference between those who were closest, either Catholic Croat or Orthodox Serb neighbors. In the villages women often played a key role in keeping alive religious traditions and a sense of bonding originating from common moral values and sharing the same faith. Invisible as they were, Muslim Bosnian women in the countryside, often illiterate, would be the keepers of the collec-

¹⁰ T. Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*; M. Pinson (ed.) *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Their Historic Development from the Middle Ages to the Dissolution of Yugoslavia*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1994; A. Popovic, *Muslim Intellectuals in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Twentieth Century: Continuities and Changes*, in S. A. Dudoignon - K. Yasushi - K. Hisao (eds.), *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World*, London - New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 221-225; X. Bougarel, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Surviving Empires*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2018; E. Ibrahim-pasic, *Women Living Islam in Post-War and Post-Socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Albuquerque NM, University of New Mexico Press, 2012.

tive identity that embodied «being Muslim the Bosnian way». This went from traditional ways of dressing, to rites and religious ceremonies, and even in keeping alive traditional rules regarding marriage, sexual life, and education.

There was also a certain degree of differentiation from central Islamic religious authorities and mainstream Islamic precepts: not all of their local religious practices were accepted in the official version Islam, as there were holidays and ceremonies Bosnian Muslims shared with the other religious communities¹¹.

5. The impact of independence, division and war on Bosnian society and Bosnian women

Independence, a destructive war as well as an uncertain and complex postwar period have resulted in a profound transformation of the Bosnian Muslim community. The rise of nationalism within Yugoslavia, coupled with dire economic crisis and the end of the Cold War brought the country to a dramatic and largely unexpected collapse. The rise of Serbian nationalism in the mid-1980s, the perception that the federal state apparatus was largely benefiting Serbia, and the fear that this situation would forever block the possibility of European integration, alongside the decline in legitimacy of the Communist party, were some of the elements leading to the terminal crisis of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. As we have seen, just like the other constitutive nations of the country, Muslim-Bosniaks had experienced in the previous decades a «national awakening». The key difference with Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, however, was that Bosnia was not just «their» Republic, since it itself had an ethnically mixed population.

In the previous centuries there had been repeated attempts of both Serbs and Croats to expand their influence in Bosnia. The process of carving up the multiethnic republic by its neighbors was therefore not new. However, with the demise of Socialist Yugoslavia it proceeded with shocking brutality: by early 1992, after a referendum boycotted by Serbs had sealed the secession of the Republic on the footsteps of Slovenia and Croatia, a widespread war started. The main responsibility in this outcome lies with the Serb elites and the «Yugoslav people's army», which in turn was dominated by a nationalistically oriented Serb military leadership.

¹¹ T. Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*.

Paramilitary units were responsible for systematically targeting civilians, bringing about the notorious ethnic cleansing and, in the final stages of the war, an outright genocide.

War completely reshaped Bosnian society. Military hostilities and widespread human rights abuses led to a vast movement of internally displaced persons and refugees to other countries in former Yugoslavia and Europe. More than 100.000 person were killed directly by military actions. Of them, approximately 30% were women and children. Ethnic cleansing was a systematic strategic goal of Bosnian Serb and Croat forces, and to a lesser extent Bosniak military. Over half of the 4.4 million population in the country was forced to flee their homes as internally displaced persons or refugees in neighboring countries and Western Europe¹².

The dualism which had shaped the Muslim-Bosniak community between a secularist urban milieu and traditionalist rural communities took a completely new form, since the two groups now shared the same urban space.

Violence and uncertainty brought about by the war facilitated the rallying around a national identity. Out of this situation a new sense of national belonging with a strong ethnoreligious component ensued. In the case of the Muslims/Bosnjaks, the ruling party SDA adopted more and more Islamic images and symbols¹³.

The consequences of armed conflict on Bosnian women were dire. War is always a gendered activity: it is the paradigmatic manifestation of toxic masculinity. Ideological and cultural discourses supporting war can be considered a form of cultural violence¹⁴. In ethnonational discourse, women became «mothers of the Nation», victims and symbols of the land to be defended. On the other hand, male citizens were expected to conform to heroic images – the warrior, the savior and guardian. Women who did not intend to conform to ethno-nationalist propaganda and stereotypes were labelled as traitors and witches¹⁵.

¹² M.-J. Calic, *Ethnic Cleansing and War Crimes, 1991-1995*, in C. W. Ingrao - T. A. Emmert (eds.), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative*, West Lafayette, IN, Purdue University Press, 2013, pp. 114-153.

¹³ X. Bougaret, *Death and the Nationalist: Martyrdom, War Memory and Veteran Identity among Bosnian Muslims*, in E. Helms - X. Bougarel - G. Duijzings (eds.), *The New Bosnian Mosaic*, pp. 167-192.

¹⁴ J. Galtung, *Cultural Violence*, in «Journal of Peace Research», 27, 1990, 3 pp. 291-305, here p. 291.

¹⁵ G. Scotto, *Friedensbildung in Mostar. Die Rolle der internationalen NRO*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2004; M.-A. Deiana, *To Settle for a Gendered Peace? Spaces for Feminist Grassroots Mobilization in Northern Ireland and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, in «Citizenship Studies», 20, 2016, 1, pp. 99-114, here p. 104.

Violence specifically targeted women: systematic rape has been a well-documented war crime, and was mainly committed against Bosniak women in territories conquered by Serb and Croat forces, as an integral part of their «ethnic cleansing» strategies, although all warring factions have been responsible for this crime. Estimates of rape victims have varied between 10.000 and 60.000, and settled on 20.000¹⁶. For nationalist extremists, targeting women was a central aspect of their strategy of destruction. After all, before the war,

«Bosnian women had been the ones who reproduced cultural difference but also took care of those little courtesies that kept Muslim, Croat and Serb families in touch with each other. It was precisely those threads of connection spun by women that the ethnic aggression was directed towards tearing asunder. Aggression that was, de facto, by men»¹⁷.

The war of 1992-1995 produced not only loss of lives and physical devastation, but also the destruction of local communities, particularly Bosniak communities in formerly mixed rural areas, such as the village that Tore Bringa had described¹⁸. It was also a traumatic event that profoundly reshaped the gender relationships in now independent Bosnia.

6. Women's agency and Islam in post-war Bosnia

After the war, two opposite processes transformed the social role of women. Nationalist ideologies now shaping public discourse promoted a return to patriarchal stereotypes, marginalizing women from the public space – a «re-traditionalization of gender roles»¹⁹ championed by the nationalists of all three ethnoreligious groups.

On the other hand, the new situation enabled a new type of engagement among Bosnian women and their presence in the public sphere. This new activism took the form of non-formal education with youth, solidarity with victims of violence and rape, psychosocial support to the most fragile. Alongside types of «service delivery» activities, new forms of commitment towards

¹⁶ I. Skjelsbæk, *The Political Psychology of War Rape: Studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina*, London - New York, Routledge, 2012.

¹⁷ C. Cockburn, *The Space between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, London, 1998, Zed Books, p. 206.

¹⁸ T. Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*.

¹⁹ Z. Spaić Šiljak, *The Confluence of Islamic Feminism and Peacebuilding*.

feminism, public agency and promoting women's rights have spread²⁰. In the newly established third sector, fostered by international NGOs and foreign donors, women also found opportunities for meaningful jobs.

Women's agency in post-war Bosnia was facilitated by the previous experience of feminist activism in former Yugoslavia. Feminism rejects an essentialist understanding of gender roles and thus questions an important aspect of ethnonationalist discourses. In the words of the late feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn, «If you pick a non-primordial gender card you are less likely to reach for a primordial national card»²¹. Feminism had also been an essential part of the small but significant antiwar movement in neighboring Croatia and Serbia – with organizations such as Women in Black in Belgrade and the Antiwar Campaign in Croatia.

The need to promote women's agency was already recognized during and immediately after the war. According to international agencies and scholars, the country needed a strong civil society sector in order to bring about real and lasting democratization and lasting peace. The OSCE had identified women as relevant interlocutors to foster the strengthening of local civil society actors as early as 1996²², that is several years before the role of women in peace processes was recognized and promoted by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

By the end of the 1990s, a network of women's organizations had been established, often with the encouragement of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the support and partnership of international non-governmental organizations. In the divided city of Mostar, women's groups were the first to meet together across ethnonational divides: the local organization *Žene Mostara* (Women of Mostar) was among the first local organizations to be founded after the war²³.

This new situation certainly presented a number of contradictions: the stated goal of women's empowerment was often jeopardized by a patronizing attitude on the side of the international agencies and the

²⁰ G. Scotto, *Friedensbildung in Mostar*; M.-A. Deiana, *Gender, Citizenship and the Promises of Peace: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Ph.D. thesis. School of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy, Queen's University, Belfast, 2011.

²¹ C. Cockburn, *The Space between Us*, p. 44.

²² G. Scotto, *Friedensbildung in Mostar*; D. Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy after Dayton*, London, Pluto Press, 2000², pp. 141-142.

²³ G. Scotto, *Friedensbildung in Mostar*.

marginalization of Bosnian women's voices. Moreover, women entering the political arena tended to display an essentialist attitude towards men-women differences, claiming a higher moral ground than corrupt (male) politicians because of their status both as women and war victims – an attitude which in the end strengthened the very essentialist and patriarchal positions they sought to overcome²⁴.

Civil Society promotion by international organizations and transnational NGOs in the years of reconstruction has been therefore harshly criticized, sometimes on abstract grounds²⁵. It has to be stressed, however, that the presence of international actors in the post-war years offered novel opportunities for Bosnian women in the public sphere. All the limits of international civil society support notwithstanding, these strategies opened up a space for a new generation of activists, and provided work opportunities for qualified women professionals who had been marginalized in a collapsed labor market.

The «international community» involved in solidarity work and reconstruction did not identify religion as a source of agency and inspiration for collective action for women as civil society actors. The general discourse of international organizations and on the role of women in post-war Bosnia was strictly secular (with the exception of a few interreligious dialogue projects)²⁶.

Religion was nevertheless an important dimension to understand motivation and cultural agenda of a number of international NGOs and aid organizations. A plethora of international faith-based NGOs participated in the global effort to show effective solidarity to the Bosnian population during and after the war. NGOs inspired by Islam have been active in humanitarian aid, but have often had an agenda of spreading their own approach to religion:

«Muslim humanitarian organizations from Kuwait, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia required religious women to follow the dictates of their understanding of Islam such as wearing

²⁴ E. Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Madison WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 2013.

²⁵ See e.g., D. Chandler, Bosnia; V. Pupavac, *Empowering Women? An Assessment of International Gender Policies in Bosnia*, in «International Peacekeeping», 12, 2005, 3, pp. 391-405; V. Pupavac, *Weaving Postwar Reconstruction in Bosnia? The Attractions and Limitations of NGO Gender Development Approaches*, in «Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding», 4, 2010, 4, pp. 475-493; R. Belloni, *The Rise and Fall of Peacebuilding in the Balkans*, Berlin - Heidelberg, Springer, 2019.

²⁶ Z. Brajovic, *The Potential of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, in M. Fischer (ed.), *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2007, pp. 149-179.

long black robes or burqas and teaching the Salafi version Islam or risk losing their paid jobs. However, Bosnian women rejected that sort of «blackmail» because they saw that these organizations appeared with their own agendas and missionary tasks»²⁷.

In May 2001, during field research in Mostar for my Ph.D. thesis²⁸, I made an interview with F. H., a Bosniak woman who at that time was a professional manager and trainer in the NGO sector. She told me the following story, which has since remained unpublished:

«When I returned to Mostar in 1994, I was looking for ways to support my cousin. So, I went to the Saudi Humanitarian Committee in the town, because they distributed food. At the door there was a sign 'Dear sisters, please cover your head'. I was standing at the door, it was winter and I could have used my scarf to cover my hair. Then I decided not to do it: if I had entered the office with my head covered, it would not have been my decision.

When I entered, I wanted to shake hands with the Arab gentleman who worked there, but he refused. I told him the reason I was there, to collect food items on behalf of a very devout relative. This person spoke Bosnian [...] He said I could not receive any help, because I am not a Moslem. I told him that I know the Quran as well as he did, and in the Quran, it is said that there is not outside sign to belong to Islam, it is rather a matter of the heart: you choose the Quran and I asked them: 'how could he know that I have decided against the Quran?'

He said: 'You don't wear a headscarf, you guys here drink alcohol and eat pork, therefore you are not Moslems. [...]'. I responded that I don't wear a headscarf because in my culture this is so [...] We are Slavic and it is normal that we have also some Catholic habits. Belonging to a religion is something personal, it is not a matter for society to decide. You see: even people from the Middle East think we are primitive, that we cannot read the Quran and they have to explain it to us»²⁹.

This story testifies to a double marginalization: in Europe and the West, Bosnia was regarded as a place where «ancient ethnic hatred» had erupted in systematic violence; in the Middle East, Bosnian Islam was seen as «primitive» as well. Between these two male-dominated worlds, women had been targets of systematic violence, and they had carried the weight of the societal crisis.

International presence, however, has taken many different forms: the transnational NGO Medica Zenica, embracing feminist and secular values and later proving conducive in the development of Bosnian Islamic femi-

²⁷ Z. Spaić Šiljak, *The Confluence of Islamic Feminism and Peacebuilding*, p. 168.

²⁸ Now published as: G. Scotto, *Friedensbildung in Mostar*.

²⁹ F. H., unpublished interview, 2001.

nism, is certainly one of the most interesting examples. It is useful to describe its work as seen «from below», from the women directly involved and the recipients of its support.

7. The birth of Islamic feminism in Bosnia: Psycho-social support and agency

An essential component of the experience of feminist approaches to Islam is its origin: in fact, Muslim traditional identity and references to the Quran were important as a way to reframe the traumatic experiences of Muslim women who had been subject to sexual violence during the war. The first steps of Islamic feminism did therefore originate as solidarity towards women victimized in the war both for their religious identity and for their being women.

From the very beginning of the war, as they were facing unspeakable violence and trauma, both local and foreign women started to organize in order to support female victims. Medica Zenica is one of the most important examples of this type of work, and its history has been well documented³⁰. Medica Zenica had been founded by the Italian-German gynecologist Monika Hauser in early 1993 in the central Bosnian town of Zenica, in the middle of the war, with the support of German private donors, and the active collaboration of a group of local women professionals. The Center combined medical care and psychosocial support aimed especially at rape victims and traumatized persons, overwhelmingly Bosniak women who had found shelter in Zenica from the ethnic cleansing campaign by Serb paramilitaries in Eastern Bosnia – and later on by Croat forces in the central region of the country.

Thus, Medica Zenica started as a typical humanitarian support project, with both international and local staff, and with a distinct secular and feminist value orientation: their staff was made out of women; together with psychosocial support, reproductive rights and abortion were among their activities. They were on good terms both with local public institutions and with Islamic authorities. Besides health care, the NGO also provided food and shelter to the most vulnerable, and quickly became a sanctuary of sorts³¹. Cockburn describes how local women felt a certain

³⁰ C. Cockburn, *The Space between Us*; C. Cockburn, *Against the Odds: Sustaining Feminist Momentum in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina*, in «Women's Studies International Forum», 36, 2013, 2, pp. 26-35.

³¹ C. Cockburn, *The Space Between Us*, p. 189.

degree of skepticism and distance from feminist values championed by Monika Hauser and her Western European colleagues.

Medica Zenica later became the breeding ground for the novel elaboration of Islamic feminism. Spahić Šiljak recalls how she and other fellow women theologians «[...] soon realized that most of the women we spoke to needed guidelines for coping and recovery within the framework of their religion, which was important to many of them»³². The theological quest for a form of Islam that would provide solace and support to bereaved war victims proved to be fruitful, immediately helping many victims, and in the longer term opening up for the new discourse of Islamic feminism in Bosnia.

Over the years, the focus of the work has shifted towards treatment and support of victims of domestic violence. After 2007, international support was reduced and the staff number cut, and ties to local public authorities have been formed, both as service delivery agency and for purposes of policy development. Medica Zenica has also participated in successful campaigns for the recognition of women war rape victims as eligible for public support and for a new law against domestic violence.

In its unique way to bring together feminist political activism, psychosocial support, and a re-invention of religious identity Medica Zenica shows the possibilities that a civil society actor has to deeply influence practices and discourses in society.

8. Women, religion and society in present-day Bosnia

Let us now return to a perspective «from above», looking at the Bosnian state in its present shape. The Dayton agreements signed in 1995 still define the country. Over the 25 years past the Dayton accords, which marked the end of armed hostilities and secured independence and «negative peace»³³ in the country, return, reconstruction, and social change have happened within the deeply dysfunctional constitutional framework provided by those accords.

³² Z. Spahić Šiljak, *The Unearthing of Islamic Feminism in Bosnia and Herzegovina through Fatima Mernissi's Work*, in this issue, pp. 163-176.

³³ J. Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, Thousand Oaks CA, Sage Publications, 1996.

Although a quarter of a century has passed, it is not possible to assess Bosnian statehood as a successful project. No other state in the post-Yugoslav space rests on such shaky foundations. In April 2021, the possibility of a breakup of the country along «ethnic» lines has resurfaced in the media. The Peace Implementation Council, the international organ supervising the implementation of the peace agreement, felt compelled to issue a strong declaration against the projects of a «peaceful dissolution» of the country, whereas the Russian Federation opposed the declaration³⁴.

Leaving aside geopolitical aspects, one reason for this situation is to be found in the ‘inherent’ paradox of Bosnian nationhood: on the one side the home of Slavic Muslims, on the other side a country whose historical identity is based on ethnoreligious pluralism. The rise of the national Bosniak community produced therefore two opposite effects: Insofar as it marked a difference in collective identity with Croatia and Serbia, it appears as the driving force for the independence of the country – vis-à-vis neighboring Croatia and Serbia. At the same time, however, a strengthening of the Bosniak ethnoreligious identity potentially increases a sense of separation with the other communities in Bosnia, endangering its traditional ethnic pluralism.

A progressive integration within the European Union is widely seen as a way to resolve this conundrum. Here comes another paradox: the most important stumbling block on the road to European integration is the constitution enshrined in the Dayton Peace Agreement. Beside designing highly inefficient structures of the new state, the current constitutional arrangements discriminate citizens on the basis of their ethnic origin. The process of European integration has thus been painstakingly slow: Bosnia-Herzegovina was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership on 2003 and has applied for membership in February 2016. To this day, Bosnia still has to comply to the general principles of rule of law and respect for human rights as a prerequisite for membership. Moreover, EU membership also depends on the political will of its members. It is not advisable to place all hope for the improvement of one’s situation in the goodwill of others.

³⁴ PIC [Peace Implementation Council], *Statement by the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board*, 4th June 2021, available at: <http://www.ohr.int/statement-by-the-peace-implementation-council-steering-board-2/>.

9. Concluding remarks: Islamic Feminism and a peaceful future for Bosnia and Europe

Against this historical and political background, and the related experiences of ordinary Bosnians, we can now fully understand the value of Fatima Mernissi's work and its reception among Muslim Bosnian women.

Islamic feminism has truly revolutionary potential here: it departs from old Bosnian Islam, where women had the role of silent keepers of the tradition, as well as from the concept of religion as part of an exclusive ethnonational identity, and it distances itself from the attempts of outside agencies to teach «proper Islam» in this Balkan country. In doing so, it invites an earnest dialogue with the other faith communities in Bosnia, and encourages Catholic and Orthodox women to reconsider their own ethno-religious identity under a feminist perspective.

Another crucial element that makes Mernissi's work so relevant in the Bosnian context is the deep listening and eloquent storytelling that the Moroccan scholar demonstrates in her work. In situations of long-standing conflict tearing apart whole societies, it is very important to give space to the stories of the weak and marginalized and to find new narratives of the past, alongside new visions of desired futures. This is an essential part of the art of peace, the «moral imagination» in the expression of the scholar-peacebuilder John Paul Lederach³⁵.

Islamic feminism may have several profound positive implications for establishing an alternative discourse of peace, mutual respect, and dialogue within the Bosniak community, in Bosnia and across the region, possibly also offering a reference point for European Islam as a whole.

First, it fosters a sense of agency for women who feel to belong to the Islamic tradition. As we have seen, in Bosnian Islam women have played an important role as keepers of the traditional religious customs and explored distinct possibilities of Islamic renewal withing Socialist modernization. It might be women belonging to an older generation, who have lived directly how it is to be a Muslim woman «the Bosnian way» and find a new perspective. Or it may be young women from urban contexts, who have rediscovered Islam as part of a newly found religious identity. Islamic feminism can help question aspects of patriarchal society and act to transform them.

³⁵ J. P. Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Second, Islamic feminism has shown the potential to nurture and care for victims of violence who had become targets because of their ethno-religious identity in war time and because of their gender in peace time. Long lasting scars and the loss of the old world can be addressed by this type of cultural and religious renewal from within one's own tradition. This caring aspect can be applied to violence within the family in peace time, as the experience at Medica Zenica shows.

Third, it calls into question the toxic masculinity which has been at the heart of separatist ethnoreligious discourse, while at the same time unmasking the instrumentalization of religious symbols for political purposes. In the 1990s, feminist discourse has been an important element in the post-Yugoslav peace movement. Adopting a feminist perspective on religion helps deconstruct a key cultural mechanism which has served to legitimize patriarchy in its worst forms. This is important because current social reality and prevailing public discourse in Bosnia largely draws on patriarchal cultural elements.

Finally, it does not force a change in the main cultural and identity-related coordinates of one's own or the other ethnoreligious groups, but instead it opens up the possibility of a change from within Muslim identity, and encourages a transversal dialogue, taking into account both religion and gender equality across ethnoreligious groups. Examples of this type of inter-religious dialogue are still relatively marginal, but they deserve attention.

As history and contemporary politics show, state diplomacy or the use of military force can redraw borders, suggest or impose grand political solutions, but they cannot track a path of emancipation for people involved in conflict and engaged in post-war transition towards stable peace.

There certainly are numerous obstacles to the development of feminist theologies in general, and of feminist Islam in particular: Spahić Šiljak³⁶ speaks of a double social stigma religious Muslim women encounter: wearing the *hijab* marginalizes them in secular society, and since they embrace a feminist perspective they are not accepted in religious and secular circles alike.

The only way forward in Bosnia and in other societies with deep seated conflicts and divisions is to listen to, encourage and foster new subjectivities, a new generation of conscious agents able to escape the quagmire

³⁶ Z. Spahić Šiljak, *The Confluence of Islamic Feminism and Peacebuilding*.

of false dichotomies – secular, modernist and democratic vs. religious, traditionalist and sectarian – and reinvent group identities and ways of living together.

While this development will be a fundamental positive contribution to the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina, it may well encourage and add vigor to similar phenomena among Muslim communities in other European countries, contributing to a new, rich and articulated European Islam, open to differences and dialogue, and to a more inclusive European society.