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THE CONFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND PEACEBUILDING: LESSONS FROM BOSNIA

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Abstract: This paper maps the closely intertwined trajectories of Islamic feminism and peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It examines how the socio-political context of the region influenced the emergence of peacebuilding and Islamic feminism, and how secular human rights and feminist organisations provided a fertile ground for female Bosnian activists to practice feminist theology even before they were exposed to the theoretical underpinnings of Islamic feminism. Through examples of notable feminists and human rights activists in the region, as well as projects committed to raising awareness about topics such as gender-equality, peace, and reconciliation, the paper explores the enduring relationship between Islamic feminism and peacebuilding. The language of religion and feminism has proven to be a useful tool for promoting peacebuilding and dialogue within the community, while at the same time secular human rights organisations continue to provide the only space for engagement with Islamic feminism in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, feminist theology, peacebuilding, secular human rights, gender equality, Muslim women

Introduction

What Islamic feminism and peacebuilding have in common and how they both emerged and reinforced each other in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of 1990s was part of my research on feminism in post- socialist and post-war Muslim contexts[1] and gender and peacebuilding.[2] The Bosnian war (1992-1995) was a trigger for many women and men to begin a search for their own identity, spirituality, and religion, and part of that journey was discovering feminism, in particular Islamic feminism. After the war, Bosnia remained stuck due to ethnic/religious divisions, poverty, and dependence on foreign aid and exposure to a variety of both Western and Eastern political and cultural influences.

This paper examines how Islamic feminist ideas started to be shaped on the foundations of the peacebuilding activism developed under the auspices of international human rights and feminist organisations during and after the war, and how the revitalisation of Islamic educational and cultural institutions in socialist Yugoslavia enabled the religious and secular education of women who became peacebuilders and conciliators in their communities.

Revival of Islam With(out) Gender Equality

Islam came to Bosnia with the Ottoman conquests in the fifteenth century. Muslims lived as a privileged group until near the end of the nineteenth century when the Austro-Hungarian Empire took reign over the territory. For the first time Muslims had to learn to live under non-Islamic rule and one of the novelties was the appointment of the grand mufti (*rais ul-ulama*) as the head of the Islamic Community in Bosnia, detached from the authority of the *shaykh al-Islam* in Istanbul.

Exposed to modernisation and secularisation Muslims struggled to keep their identity and faith under different regimes through the twentieth century.[3] Secularisation during the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1990) was a particular challenge in the first phase, between 1945 and 1968 when religion was completely separated from public life. The second phase of gradual liberation and awakening of religion started in 1970 and lasted until the late 1980s. As part of the global trends of Islamic revival, Muslims in Bosnia returned to observing religion, building mosques, and re-opening Islamic education and cultural institutions such as the Gazi Husref-Bey Madrasa for men (1961) and for women (1978) and the Islamic Studies Institute (1977) for both women and men.[4]

Reform ideas of nineteenth-century scholars such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Sayyid A. Khan came to Bosnia mainly through the scholarship of Bosnians who studied at Al-Azhar University during the twentieth century. From 1970 onward, Islamic revival was also advanced by the Islamic press such as the weekly magazine *Preporod* and the monthly magazine *Islamska misao* as well as through translations of Islamic literature such as the ground-breaking book by Pakistani scholar, Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1978), which was one of the key texts in the Islamic studies curriculum in Bosnia.

Despite the fact that women also attended the Gazi Husref-Bey Madrasa and the Islamic Studies Institute in Sarajevo, and that many reform thinkers were part of the curriculum, these changes did not include the introduction of gender themes. Gender equality was reflected only in the increasing number of women who graduated from the newly opened Islamic institutions that partially integrated them into Islamic community activities such as preaching to women during Ramadan; participation in some rituals practices like the *mevlud*, (Arabic: *mawlid*, the birthday of the Prophet) or the *tevhid* (Arabic: *tawhid* unity and oneness of Allah), the farewell ritual with recitation of *dhikr* at commemorations of death together with men; and through working as teachers of religious education (*muallimat*) in mosques and public schools from 1994. Before the 1970s all these activities were gender segregated.[5] Women who studied in the first Woman's Madrasa between 1933 when it was established and 1948 when it was shut down by the Communist regime in Yugoslavia, together with women from the younger generations of women who studied at the Madrasa when it re-opened in 1978, perform these rituals for women only.

Local Muslim scholars who appeared to be progressive and oriented towards reform, gender, and feminism were completely absent from the scholarly discourse and debate. They were not integrated into the university curriculum or into any other alternative form of education. As a student of the Islamic Studies Institute in the late 1980s, I realised that something was missing. Studying about Muslim women by only focusing on motherhood and their educational roles within the family seemed unfulfilling. The only example of female leadership was that of 'Aisha, a wife of the Prophet Muhammad, in the "Battle of the Camel" but it was taught as a disgraceful attempt of manipulation by the "Mother of Believers," who was tricked into thinking that a woman could take part in the leadership of her community. Like most of my colleagues in late 1980s I did not know how to articulate my discomfort, because I did not have the appropriate vocabulary at my disposal. This only began to change with the start of the war in Bosnia in 1992 and my acquaintance with European secular feminists.

The Emergence of Feminism and Peacebuilding

The emancipation of women started in socialist Yugoslavia in 1946 when they obtained suffrage rights but granting gender equality was a state-directed project. Feminism arose in late 1970s in opposition to the state-controlled gender equality project although it was mostly a secular and atheist discourse that did not take religion and female believers into account. Female scholars at universities in Zagreb, Ljubljana, Belgrade and Sarajevo brought to the surface questions of freedom and individual choice because, as Slavenka

Drakulic explains, women wanted more than being part of the workforce and Communist Party-controlled political participation.[6] Not only were religious women marginalised by the state Communist ideology and secular feminists, but they were marginalised as well by their own faith communities.[7] Muslim women who entered Islamic studies and mastered classical Islamic texts and teachings did not have the opportunity to learn about feminism in general and about Islamic feminism in particular. The space for their activism was limited to the aforementioned rituals of the *mevlud* and *tevhid*.

The eruption of the war in 1992 changed the course of women's lives. Suddenly they had to deal with painful issues such as wartime rape, torture, and loss of families and homes. Female theologians, including myself, became engaged for the first time in the Islamic Community. However, the Islamic community in Bosnia limited the space for our activities to the religious education of refugees. Muslim humanitarian organisations from Kuwait, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia required religious women to follow the dictates of their understanding of Islam such as wearing 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 organisations appeared with their own agendas and missionary tasks.

New opportunities came with European secular feminist organisations which arrived in Bosnia to help women in promoting and protecting women's human rights. Medica Zenica established by German feminists in 1993 became the first feminist NGO in Bosnia. It gathered together a team of international and local experts. For the first time in our experience, international secular feminists accommodated religion and religious perspectives in the process of trauma healing and enabling women to get back their lives. They did not come to impose an outside approach, but rather to work cooperatively harnessing local religious and cultural practices in healing women's trauma. In the socialist period secular and atheist feminists did not include religious women in their activities. However, during and after the war, secular and religious women worked together because they shared the same vision to empower Bosnian women and advance their rights.

Secular feminist organisations constituted the only safe space in that period for religious women to discuss feminism from a religious perspective. As I was part of the process of shaping feminist theology and Islamic feminism in Bosnia I provide insight into peacebuilding and Islamic feminism initiatives from my own personal experience as an activist and scholar along with the perspectives of peacebuilders Amra Pandžo and Sabiha Husić. Peacebuilding and Islamic feminist initiatives were developed exclusively within

secular NGOs and at the University of Sarajevo. The Islamic community remains closed to these ideas until this day.

Islamic Feminism Born in the Lap of the Secular

When Medica Zenica was established I was invited to join their psychosocial team to bring a religious perspective to trauma healing. Soon after Sabiha Husić, who is a prominent peacebuilder today, became part of the team as well.[8] Secular international feminists believed that wartime rape survivors, the majority of whom were Muslims, would feel better and more confident about accepting psychosocial treatment if they had somebody from their own religious background supporting them. This proved to be correct. Raped women felt more comfortable opening up to and talking about their traumatic experience with coreligionists. Religion was a refuge for them when everything was falling apart. It became a great coping mechanism for many women. We had to react and answer the immediate needs of hundreds of refugee women who survived various types of violence. We were open to whatever might help. At that time neither Sabiha nor I knew anything about feminism, Islamic feminism, or gender equality in general. All these words and concepts sounded alien, but we could not wait to explore, and learn about feminism.

We did not have any support from the Islamic community because they did not have personnel equipped to deal with trauma and healing. To them, the word rape echoed the shame of their community and nation because they could not protect the bodies and honor of their women. The sole positive step they undertook was a symbolic one; issuing a religious decree (*fatwa*) designating female wartime survivors of violence as heroines of the war and instructing their families to accept them and help them to heal. It was important for women to hear these words of support but they also needed counseling and more tangible forms of aid. It was up to Sabiha and me to try to answer some very difficult questions such as: Why did God let us get raped and tortured? How can I believe in God again? Am I sinful? What do I do with a child born of rape? They asked many other questions which we were not prepared to answer.

We learned to listen and be there for these women. In these shared moments of suffering our feminist theology was born without our knowing it. We focused on helping these women and alleviating their pain, and not on naming what we were doing. It was not theoretical considerations that helped us practice feminist theology but rather the opposite. Our practical work with the "do it first and then name it" approach helped us shape our first feminist hermeneutics through our contextualised readings of the Qur'an and Hadith.[9]

These readings were not rooted in classical commentaries. We did not have access to them at that time. But we also assumed that we could not find in such sources answers that would help us with the concrete situation of wartime rape in such sources. We applied *ijtihad* or independent reasoning to comfort human beings who experienced terrible pain just because they belonged to a particular ethnic and religious group. We were driven by Islamic teachings on our common humanity (creation form a single entity, Qur'an 7:189), compassion (Qur'an 7:156), justice (Qur'an 4:135), *taqwa* (piety or righteous behaviors) as the only relevant distinguisher before God, and verses on the equality of all human beings and competing in performing good deeds (Qur'an 49:13). Through this we helped many women and families find ways to deal with trauma and lessen their feelings of guilt and shame.

Using *ijtihad* Sabiha introduced new Islamic practices such as the naming of a newborn. This ritual was a powerful practice in re-connecting raped women and their families and served to bond them to their children. This ritual was usually performed by a man or imam in Bosnia, but Sabiha introduced a new practice whereby women started to perform the ritual of naming the newborn. She helped them use it as a platfrom or a platform to build new connections and strenghten relations that were affected by horrific crimes and traumatic experiences.[10]

Sabiha continued to work with these women after I left in 1994. Over time she became a distinguished therapist, and peacebuilder. She became the manager of Medica Zenica when the international feminists withdrew physically and financially from the region. She also worked to obtain legal rights for women victims of wartime rape and survivors of domestic violence in the complex domestic legal system of Bosnia. In partnership with other NGOs and state institutions Sabiha fought to provide equal rights for anyone who experienced the horrors of the war, not just Bosnian Muslims. Through these, and many other initiatives,

Sabiha created a web of networks that included civil society organisations and state institutions in order to pursue peace in her community and her country. While Medica Zenica remains a secular feminist organisation it is run by an Islamic feminist who successfully combines secular and Islamic approaches to women's rights and peacebuilding. Both Islamic feminism and peacebuilding grew together and reinforced each other in the lap of secular feminist organisations.

In 1998, during the post-war period, secular organisations came to incorporate more religious perspectives in conversations on gender equality and peacebuilding because

religion despite its divisive role during and after the war remained a powerful identity marker and deeply important to many women and men in dealing with ethnic/religious divisions, war crimes, and trauma healing. Some of the first organisations that encouraged scholarship and research on Islamic feminism were the NGO Žene Ženama (Women to Women) and the faith-based organisation IMIC Zajedno, which was led by the prominent Franciscan friar Marko Orsolic, a doyen of multi-religious peacebuilding in the Balkans. I learned a great deal about peacebuilding and reconciliation from the Franciscans who have had a long tradition of ethics reflected in being and living with people which is the optimal help people can get to move beyond their suffering a war-induced trauma.

Gender, Feminist, and Religion Curriculum

During the war we did not have time to study and explore the topics of gender and feminism. However, after the war, in 1998, some feminist NGOs, including Women to Women in Sarajevo, established the first non-degree program of women's studies named after the Serbian feminist scholar and anti-war activist, Zarana Papic. Professors Nirman Moranjak Bamburac, Jasna Baksic-Muftic, and Jasminka Babic-Avdispahic were the scholars from University of Sarajevo who first designed the program and taught in it. They invited me to develop the syllabus on gender and religion as well as to provide comparative perspectives of feminist theology in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions.

I accepted the challenge and started exploring feminist theology. I learned about feminist theology in Christianity from the works of Elisabeth Shussler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Rauther, and Mary Daly. Through the works of Judith Plaskow and Rachel Adler I studied the Jewish perspective. I investigated Islamic feminist theology through the scholarship of Riffat Hassan, Aziza al-Hibri, and Fatima Mernissi. In the years that followed this list was enriched with the scholarship of amina wadud, Margot Badran, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and others. One of the challenges I faced was how to teach feminist theology and how to introduce feminist interpretations of religious texts in the Bosnian multi- religious context. During my scholarly journey I was stunned by the amount of rich literature and number of feminist voices in the different religious traditions that questioned the prevailing patriarchal interpretations of God's message while at the same time providing feminist analytical tools to approach the sacred texts with gender sensitive lenses.

One of my most important discoveries was Fatima Mernissi's book *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* on the lives of fifteen women who seized power in Muslim lands between the 11th and 17th centuries, exercising the prerogatives of a political leader including having their

names inscribed on coins and invoked during Friday congregational prayer. I translated the book into Bosnian. When it was published in 2005 in Sarajevo it became the first Islamic feminist text in our local language. Another ground-breaking book, *In Memory of Her*, by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was translated into Croatian in 2011 by Marina Miladino, medievalist and freelance translator from Zagreb.

The women's studies program created by the NGO Women to Women attracted both female and male students. They were particularly interested in the intersection of gender with women's other identities and socially prescribed roles. A revelation for students was reading the Qur'an and the Bible through gender sensitive and feminist lenses which was eye-opening for the students in striking contrast to the approaches of mainstream theology that were devoid of gender as analytical category. Many of the students became active peacebuilders whose work was informed by these feminist theology courses where they had learned how to use non-mainstream theological exegesis in navigating peacebuilding in their communities.

Gender Studies and Religious Studies

In 2006, eight years after the Women's Studies Program was established under the NGO Women for Women, a team of scholars from the University of Sarajevo under the leadership of Professor Nirman Moranjak-Bamburac obtained approval from the Faculty Senate to start the first Master's degree program in Gender Studies at the university. There was a desire to introduce gender studies in the undergraduate program as well, but obstacles put in the way preventing this from happening persist to this day. I taught a Gender and Religion course in the Master's Program. I invited the Catholic theologian Rebeka Anic from Croatia, a Jewish feminist gender studies scholar Judith Frishman from the Netherlands, and prominent faith-based peacebuilder from the United States, Marcie Lee. The first generation of doctoral students enrolled in 2014.

In 2007 the Master's program in Religious Studies in Sarajevo entered into partnerships with Arizona State University and Oslo University. With Amra Pandzo, a prominent faith-based peacebuilder today, I was part of the team that designed the curriculum for these partnerships and served as program coordinator for seven years. This program was unique in southeast Europe because in the post-socialist era theological studies only existed within various religious traditions. Our courses provided comparative Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives. Women theologians from the Balkans and Western Europe taught a course on gender and religion collaboratively. Two generations of graduate students

equipped with tools to pursue gender equality, peace, and reconciliation function today as teachers of religious education, human rights activists, peacebuilders, and clerks in state institutions.

A striking achievement of the gender and religious studies program was seen when a generation of young scholars and activists initiated their own research starting to build a new body of literature on feminism in the Bosnian language. Some of them worked closely with me on my research project Contesting Female, Feminist, and Muslim Identities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which became a book of the same name published in 2012.[11] The aim was to produce the first study in the post-war and post-socialist context that examined how female, feminist, and Muslim identities intersect, construct, and transform each other and what strategies women employ to remain faithful to both cultural and religious traditions while fighting for gender equality. We discovered that the strong social stigma attached to feminism prevents many women from publicly embracing it. The research also revealed that Muslim women face a double social stigma: as religious women wearing the hijab they are marginalised in secular environments, and as feminists they are not accepted in either religious and secular contexts. To avoid pressure, or to preserve their professional positions religious and secular women alike often hide their feminist identity.

(Religious) Peacebuilding on the Wings of (Islamic) Feminism

In my research on women and peacebuilding in Bosnia, I found women to be key players in the peace and reconciliation efforts. But, in the words of Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur "religion was not a conversation starter."[12] In the first five years after the war religion was absent from peacebuilding efforts with the exception of few multi- religious initiatives undertaken by the Franciscans. Because of ambivalence towards religion from 1990 onward many religiously oriented women did not use religion as argument in peacebuilding. The foundation of women's peacebuilding activism was built on an ethics of care and a feminist ethics of justice and compassion. Socialist ethics of unity and equality as well as international human rights norms embedded in the constitutional legal framework of Bosnia played also an important role in shaping their peace work.

Women who were preoccupied with humanitarian activities and reconciliation efforts, as Elissa Helms pointed out in her research in Bosnia, did not declare feminist identities and political sentiments.[13] Like myself, they did not have time to explore feminism before becoming active in the community. Later when I conducted my research on feminist and Muslim identities I discovered that education and civic activism were key to developing

feminist thinking. In time, as women's human rights activists learned more about feminism through trainings organised mainly by secular women's organisations they overcome problems associated with social stigma and started to publicly declare their feminism. However, prejudice against feminism remains strong to this day causing women to keep their distance. Complicating matters further is the reluctance of donors and state institutions to support explicitly feminist NGOs.[14]

Women meanwhile played key roles in peacebuilding in local communities. Even though they did most of the peace work, women have remained invisible[15] and are still marginal in public life.[16] Men dominated decision-making, leaving women without the ability to bring their perspectives to the table.[17] However, as Svetlana Slapšak points out, because of their marginal position in society and politics women have always been more ready to communicate, reconcile, and create networks of support.[18] Importantly in the peacebuilding scene, Muslim women collaborated with women from other ethnic and religious and non-religious groups, crossing the ethnic borders imposed during the war and the gender boundaries that governed the lives of women in the post-socialist patriarchal society as they had before.

Intersection of Peacebuilding and Islamic Feminism

Amra Pandzo was one of many women in Bosnia who were raised in a communist family in the socialist period and re-discovered Islam during the war. A secular feminist tradition is deeply rooted in her family background. Her strong and highly educated grandmother, mother, and aunts were leaders in their family and in the community. Amra embraced Salafi Islam which adheres to a rigid and reductionist interpretation of the religion, struggling in the beginning to reconcile her religious and feminist identity.[19] Previously she had never known gender segregation but under pressure from Salafism she complied with it for some time while searching for alternative understandings of Islam. She struggled on daily basis with injustice and inequality justified by a conservative reading of Islam. Meanwhile she was associating with women human rights activists and Muslim feminists.

In time she declared an Islamic feminist identity. Being an Islamic feminist to her meant "practicing Islam in an enlightened way."[20] It also included a determination to deal with controversial issues such as ethnic and religious differences and gender equality in faith-based peacebuilding work. As she asserts, genuine peacebuilding work cannot avoid these "hard topics" in order to make everyone comfortable. Peacebuilding for Amra is not a comfortable endeavor but a very demanding task that cannot be separated from her life.

She considers peacebuilding her life calling. That life calling is driven by the Qur'anic declaration that human beings are created from a single soul or entity, *nafs al-wahidah* (Qur'an 7:189) and that the promotion of equality and competing in good deeds which the Qur'an urges (Qur'an 49:13) are the best means to reconcile differences. She believes that peace is a spirit that finds its way. With this conviction, she established her own NGO called Small Steps to plant the seeds of peace wherever she finds fertile ground within or outside religious communities.

Using the smart-flexible strategy which Lederach explains is, "more [about]… the creation of platforms for generating creative responses … than [about] creating solutions,"[21] Amra tried to build a platform for dialogue and peace in both civil society organisations and in the Islamic community. Instead of clearly stating her Islamic feminist goals and agenda, she chose another path. She offered collaboration as a conciliator and peacebuilder who wanted to help teachers of religious education acquire peacebuilding skills relevant to their work in schools and communities.

The word "peacebuilder" did not resonate as a threat, but rather as something fluid and undefined enabling her to obtain permission from the grand mufti to train Islamic education teachers. She designed a manual laying a foundation for peacebuilding approaches in the Islamic tradition, which included gender sensitive approaches to the Qur'anic text.[22]

Amra faced two challenges. One, to explain why it is important to take the first step and help teachers understand that a person who steps outside the cycle of violence or victimhood, whether the perpetrator or the victim, wins by experiencing psychological relief and spiritual growth. Two, to discuss Islamic feminist identity with teachers who had discovered it online and asked her about it. Amra related to me that her explanation of Islamic feminism sounded as she had dropped a bomb.[23]

Being a feminist and at the same time educating teachers of Islamic religion was something these teachers could not easily reconcile. She does not wear the hijab which is considered to be an important marker of legitimacy for a Muslim woman and necessary for being accepted as an authority figure. The majority of Muslim women in Bosnia today do not wear the *hijab* nor do they find it relevant to their faith.[24] But if they wish to speak about religion they are expected to adhere to conventional dress codes. Amra's feminist identity stirred up the teachers who suspected that Amra had a hidden agenda. They asked if she were a Bahá'í because Bahá'is are often connected to the peace movement. The Bahá'í

religion was established in Iran in the mid 19th century. Its teaching rests on the welfare of humankind, peace and global prosperity.

Amra's approach was not to deny her feminism, but rather to explain that her feminism is rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet and that she is working within this religious framework to achieve peace and justice. Hearing her explanation people accepted her and continued to work with her. Having their legitimacy questioned is something that most Muslim women experience when they do public work. Amra thinks that being a woman and a peacebuilder outside the conservative Islamic community mainstream helped the doors to collaboration within the community open more easily.

Like many other peacebuilders Amra used "affirmative essentialism" depicting women as more peace-oriented, consistent, and honest than men.[25] She explained that in a patriarchal culture women and men are trained and socialised differently. Men are taught to wear different faces in different domains of life. Women are expected to be more consistent. Amra compared men to actors who play different roles, recite lines designed for different situations and do not find this disturbing or morally problematic. Women, according to her experience, tend to be more task-oriented, responsible and consistent. Although she uses the notion of affirmative essentialism Amra does not think that women are inherently peaceful but rather they are socialised to be more family and community-oriented.[26]

Bridging the Secular/Religious Gap with Religious Feminism

For some years after the war dozens of NGOs worked on peacebuilding and reconciliation in Bosnia. Only a few tried to integrate a religious feminist perspective, most notably students from the Gender and Religious Studies Program at the University of Sarajevo. A lack of adequate knowledge is one of the reasons for the absence of religious feminist perspective. But another, and especially salient one, was the reluctance of international and local NGOs to do anything that might provoke negative reactions from faith communities.

When I tried to talk to UNIFEM (now UNWOMEN) in Sarajevo in 2006 about connecting religious and feminist perspectives to peacebuilding work they became anxious and did not know how to convey this proposal to their headquarters in New York. Their biggest concern was to avoid conflict with the faith communities. Two years later I tried again with new arguments. I pointed out that the Gender and Religious Studies Programs at the University of Sarajevo had only a limited outreach and if we wanted to gain a more profound influence in local communities, especially outside Sarajevo, we had to unite the

efforts of secular women's NGOs and faith-based NGOs as well as faith communities, including the Islamic community, in order to succeed in promoting gender equality and eliminating discrimination against women. I also argued that although the United Nations Security Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (2000) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW 1981) were ratified years ago their impact in local communities has been negligible. To effectively channel the message of gender equality guaranteed in the international human rights norms and standards to the wider population, and to achieve their application I insisted that we needed to marshal local customs and religious traditions. Human rights language is arid and not convincing to ordinary women and men. If we transmit that message through sensitive cultural and religious narratives and stories which resonate more intimately we can achieve greater impact. For instance, when the story is told how Umm Salama, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, proposed a peaceful solution to the Prophet at Hudaybiyyah when the people from Makka did not allow Muslims from Medina to perform the hajj, as an example of conflict resolution people will grasp its importance and remember it. The names and articles of international conventions do not have the same resonance.

They finally heard me but they were jittery and made me promise that I would not cause any conflict with the faith communities. With my colleagues, Rebeka Anić, a Catholic theologian and gender studies scholar, and Milica Bakić Hayden, an Orthodox Christian from Belgrade who teaches religious studies in the United States, I started the project titled Modification of the Social and Cultural Patterns of Conduct of Men and Women in Bosnia and Herzegovinia in the Transcultural Psycho-social Educational Foundation (TPO) in Sarajevo. For the first time we had an opportunity to offer women peacebuilding activists training materials based on the teachings of Christianity and Islam, and a universal human rights perspective. The collaborative work of the three of us along with women of various religious backgrounds from Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia resulted in the book *Women: Believers and Citizens* with an accompanying training manual.[27] This was the first comparative study on human rights from a secular-religious perspective in the Balkans.

The book was used to facilitate twelve-day training for women trainers from NGOs, faith communities, and faith-based organisations as well as religious education teachers. It was demonstrated by marshalling religious arguments that violence cannot be justified by religion and that feminist interpretations of Islam can help women act as conciliators in their own communities. The collaborative work of Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian feminists, facilitated more profound dialogue among women activists who

realised that patriarchy operates in common ways in all traditions, keeping women submissive to man's authority and leadership.

Using a similar approach Sabiha Husić, the Islamic theologian and peacebuilder; Alen Kristić, a Catholic theologian and peacebuilder from Sarajevo; Marija Grujic, a student from the Religious Studies program at the University of Sarajevo, and I designed the manual *Countering Violence with Dialogue*, focusing on gender-based violence from the perspective of Christian and Islamic traditions.[28] We noticed that women in particular were not willing to come to activities when the word "violence" appeared in the invitation and the program. To attract people we used the terms "dialogue" and "multi-religious dialogue" in announcing gatherings and once underway we proceeded to tackle issues of violence.

During the sixteen days of the activism campaign more than a thousand women from fifteen Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian villages came together. The idea was to gather five women from each of these different kinds of villages in order to start a dialogue. After they got to know each other we raised questions of gender-based violence to illustrate that violence happens everywhere and in each community. Using religious arguments against domestic violence and employing multi-religious dialogue as a vehicle to channel discussion on the sensitive issues of gender-based violence proved to be a worthwhile approach.

Conclusion

Islamic feminism and peacebuilding emerged during wartime in Bosnia (1992-1995) when devastating circumstances required urgent answers and actions. Bosnian Muslim women began their peacebuilding journey with the support of European secular feminist organisations. They used religious arguments about the equality of human beings to contribute to helping heal war wounds. In that way, they unconsciously practiced feminist theology and became Islamic feminists. Thanks to their theological background some Muslim women acquired in Islamic educational institutions revived during the socialist era they were able to combine religious and secular knowledge and tools to help those in need during and after the war as peacebuilders and conciliators in their communities.

Secular human rights organisations and gender and religious studies programs of the University of Sarajevo were, and still are, the only space for the development of and engagement with Islamic feminism. Rare examples, such as the peacebuilding program for teachers of Islamic education in public school run by Islamic feminist and peacebuilder

Amra Pandžo demonstrates how women can use peacebuilding to channel Islamic feminist ideas among Muslims. As they operate on the foundations of the Qur'an and Sunna they may have chances to open dialogue with the mainstream practices of Islam in Bosnia that are still male-dominated and conservative.

NOTES

[1] Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, *Contesting Female, Feminist, and Muslim Identities: Post-socialist Contexts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*. Sarajevo: Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo, 2012.

[2] Zilka Spahić Šiljak, *Shining Humanity. Life Stories of Women Peacebuilders in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Cambridge Scholars Pubishing, 2014.

[3] Ahmet Alibašić and Asim Zubčević, "Islamic Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina." in Ednan Aslan (ed.) *Islamic Education in Europe*, Wien-Koln- Wiemar: Bohlau Werlag, 2009, p.44.

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[5] Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way. Identity and Community in a Central Bosnia Village*. Princeton University Press, 1996.

[6] Slavenka Drakulic, *Smrtni Grijesi feminizma: Ogledi o mudijologiji*. Zagreb: Znanje, 1984.

[7] Zilka Spahić Šiljak, "Do it and Name it: Feminist Theology and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina". p. 179.

[8] Sabiha Husić, a peacebuilder who advocates for wartime rape survivors at Medica Zenica, the first feminist organisation in Bosnia established in 1993 is one of the peacebuilders who created safe space specifically for wartime rape women. As a young Muslim refugee from the central Bosnia she was expelled from her home in Vitez (Central Bosnia) by her neighbors Croats/ Catholics in 1993, and soon after she settled down in Zenica city, one of the few territories at that time that were not occupied by Serbs or Croats.

She became involded in Medica - – the center established by German feminists- to bring religious perspective into therapy work with wartime rape women. Her full story is avaialble in the book *Shinining Humanity: Lifes Stories of Women Peacebuilders in Bosnia*, Cambirdge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

[9] Ibid., 181.

[10] Personal Interview with Sabiha Husić, December 11, 2012.

[11] Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, *Contesting Female, Feminist, and Muslim Identities: Post-socialist Contexts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*. Sarajevo: Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo, 2012.

[12] Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur, 2009, *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans*. New York: Continuum, 108-124.

[13] Elissa Helms, 2013, *Innocence and Victimhood, Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 158-192.

[14] Ibid.,

[15] Elisabeth J. Porter, *Peacebuilding: Women in International Perspective*, London: Routledge, 3, 2007.

[16] Dona Pankhurst, 2009, *Gendered Peace: Women's Struggles for Post-war Justice and Reconciliation*, New York, Routledge, 26.

[17] Swanee Hunt, *Worlds Apart: Bosnian Lessons for Global Security*, Durham, Duke University Press. 2011.

[18] Svetlana Slapšak, 2001, "The Use of Women and the Role of Women in the Yugoslav War," in Inger Skjelsbaek and Dan Smith (eds.), *Gender, Peace, and Conflict*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 181.

[19] In Bosnia these Muslims, usually called Wahhabis, are a new addition to the Bosnian Islamic scene. Salafis claim to represent an Islam that is "pure and free from any additions, deletions or alterations" (according to "An Introduction to the Salafi Da'wah" http://www.qss.org/articles/salafi/text.html).

[20] Margot Badran, "A Piece of Peace: Looking at Feminist Spaces in Islam," *Track Two: "Religion, Conflict, and Peace," Reflections on Peace and Conflict in the Aftermath of September 11*," Quarterly of the Centre for Conflict Resolution, University of Cape Town, South Africa, 2003 (an earlier version presented as a talk at Robert L. Bernstein Symposium on Fundamentalism and Modernity, the Center for International Human Rights Yale University, Apr. 2002).

[21] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 85.

[22] Amra Pandžo, *Priručnik za nastavnice i nastavnike islamske vjeronauke o mirovnoj dimenziji islama*. (Manual for teachers of Islamic religion on peace dymension of Islam), Sarajevo: Udruženje za dijalog u porodici i društvu Mali koraci, 2008.

[23] Personal Interview with Amra Pandžo, January 16, 2013.

[24] Spahić-Šiljak, *Contesting Female, Feminist, and Muslim Identities*. p.254.

[25] Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood, Gender, Nation*. 9. 2013.

[26] Fiona Robinson, *The Ethics of Care. A Feminist Approach to Human Security*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 120. 2011.

[27] Zilka Spahić Šiljak and Rebeka Jadranka Anić (eds.). *Women: Believers and Citizens* (Sarajevo: TPO Fondacija Sarajevo, 2009). Information about the book and the Project are available on the TPO Foundation Sarajevo website: www. tpo.ba

[28] Zilka Spahić Šiljak and Sabiha Husić (eds.) *Countering Violence with Dialogue.* TPO foundation 2010. www.tpo.ba

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