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Agency through Struggle: Muslim Women's Identities in Secular Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Abstract

This paper is a result of a ten-month research project in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina funded under the International Researches and Exchanges Programme Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Grant. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation, one-on-one interviews, personal stories, focus groups, open-ended lengthy surveys of religiosity and network studies, I explored some of the ways in which Muslim women in Bosnia and Herzegovina exert agency and reject the characterisation of victimhood so often placed upon them by foreign researchers and scholars. This research paper also examines how religious belief and practice help women to attain status and prestige within a secular state. The main objective of this project was to investigate how Islam helps women to deal with the daily challenges brought on by the political and economic problems in a post-war environment. Most importantly, this project explores acts of power and rebellion achieved through religious belief and practice.

1. Introduction

On December 14th, 1995, an independent Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bosnia), its citizens, and its neighbours signed the Dayton Accords in order to establish lasting peace and bring an end to three and a half years of brutal and devastating civil war. Signing the agreement was the first step in bringing stability to the region; the hard part was yet to follow. The people of Bosnia were presented with the difficult challenge of nation and state building against the backdrop of a partitioned country, an obsolete socialist political and economic system, and generations-long suppression of ethnic and religious identities. The war created profound demographic shifts: ethnically 'cleansed', homogenous enclaves; the flight of the highly educated; and a rural-to-urban exodus. Complicating the process was a massive influx of international aid, non-governmental projects and capital, with multiple projects funded by Islamic states, charities, and religious institutions as well as those funded by Western countries.

The war severely disrupted kin and community networks and little is known about the extent to which women have or have not been able to reconstitute these sources of social support. My dissertation explores women's religious beliefs and practices ('ethno-religious identity') and the impact of NGOs (both faith-based and non-faith-based) on women's social, political and economic lives. I explore women's community-based networks (formed by the NGOs and through local religious institutions) and their effect on women's daily existence. For the purposes of this examination, a faith-based NGO (Nahla) and a variety of other religious institutions located in Sarajevo allowed me to examine three main themes: the ways women have built kin- and community-based networks in the post-war environment, how they deal with the challenges of daily life, and how their religious beliefs and practices have changed, fluctuated, decreased or intensified.

In the context of my research, 'ethno-religious identity' includes the relationship between Islam as a social identity (a set of formal doctrines), Islam as beliefs and practices, and Bosnian nationality (Bringa 1995). Peoples' perceptions of their losses, gains and sacrifices and a new sense of identity form a necessary point of analysis in post-war societies. In Bosnia, heightened ethno-religious identity, religious belief and practice are coping strategies that men and women, both Christians and Muslims, have employed to deal with the new conditions. Muslims were accustomed to advancing South Slav unity during the communist period because they were not recognised as having a separate nationality of their own (Bieber 2000; Friedman 2000; Lampe and Mazower 2004). This treatment contributed to strong pre-war secularism, including a deterioration of belief and practice among Bosnia's Muslims. After the war, however, a religious resurgence took place (Friedman 2000). In this paper, I explore how the post-war environment, the secular state, and the revitalisation of religious belief have affected Muslim women. I also focus on how faith-based NGOs help women to forge new personal networks and how NGOs impact women's religious beliefs and practices. Last but not least, I discuss how Bosnian women exert agency and cast off the stereotypes thrust upon them.

2. Literature Review

The transformation of gender relations due to the revitalisation of religious faith and the strengthening of religious institutions is a salient and current issue in the Eastern European context. Bulgaria, another Eastern European country besides Bosnia with a significant native Muslim population, opened its borders in 1989. Considerable monetary aid was then channeled into Pomak (native Muslim) communities by Islamic states, including Saudi Arabia (Ghodsee 2006). As a result, Wahhabi ideology (the current Saudi Arabian interpretation and practice of Islam) has profoundly changed gender relations among Pomaks; for example, women have adopted gender-segregated beliefs and practices. Many Pomak women who once enjoyed somewhat equal treatment under socialism now spend much of their time performing child-care and household tasks. Similarly, Bosnia's Muslim women, the primary victims of the war, are at the forefront of religious efforts.

The importance of NGOs in developing civil society in post-socialist and war-torn states is undeniable. NGOs in post-socialist Eastern Europe usually focus on one of three missions: economic development, increased political involvement, or religious revitalisation (Haugerud 2004; Mendelson and Glenn 2002). NGOs are integral to the building of civil society in new nation-states in post-Soviet Eastern Europe and often contribute to the functioning of the state; they sometimes even take over previously state-run activities (Wedel 1998). Helms (2003) argues that Bosnian women gravitate to NGOs because they are marginalised in politics and business. NGOs have become integral to the way some women understand their place within the new state, market economy, and world.

Popular media both inside and outside Bosnia have consistently portrayed Bosnian Muslim women as victimised, powerless, and innocent (Helms 2003). The image used in Bosnia today, as well as that exported to the western world, usually involves 'rural and/or religious Bosniac women wearing head scarves, as symbols of (Bosniac) national suffering or identity' (Helms 2003). This depiction has become an important part of the public Bosnian Muslim image and representation. In this paper I explore how stereotypes impact Bosnian Muslim women's self images and what they do to combat the contradictions they see between their portrayal by the press and their own identity.

The main hypotheses of my research project address the intersection between women's religiosity, their kin- and community-based networks, and their economic and educational backgrounds. Many urban Bosnians – and most of the western world – see the rise of Islamic practices and observance among women in Bosnia as the outcomes of limited education and economic instability. In addition, since the images of Muslim women in Bosnia often incorporate victimhood and powerlessness, I address how the women exert agency and cast off these stereotypes.

Much like in other ethnographies of Muslim women, exploring women's agency and power, as well as the ways in which gender roles have been altered since the end of the war, is an important part of this project. In addition, I investigate whether a decrease in autonomy and agency among Bosnian Muslim women has occurred as a result of increased religious faith and practice. Many Bosnians believed that the secular state afforded them equal rights. In fact, the communist state gendered the workforce, relegated women to the private sphere, and, most importantly, essentialised their 'womanhood' based on their image as workers and mothers, but never as workers, politicians or activists. In this paper I explore the ways in which Bosnian Muslim women, who are perceived as oppressed in contrast to their more secular counterparts, express agency.

3. Agency through Community

Post-war societies present an interesting challenge for conducting research. During my work on this project I found that getting to know people and getting them to trust me as a researcher is a difficult process. I spent over six months of my fieldwork participating in the school and classes at the women's educational organisation, observing, without asking many questions, before I was able to begin the extended inter-

views. In order to be able to ask the kinds of questions that I posed in my religiosity survey, I needed to belong not only to the organisation, but to a strong network of women. Women's networks are very common in Bosnia, especially among Muslim women. This is primarily a result of Ottoman traditions and the strict gender roles instituted by Islam, which was the chosen faith of the Ottomans. In the Holy Qur'an surah 24, verse 31 it is forbidden for men and women to see each other unless they are related or married.

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's father, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (Yusufali 1998).

Interpretations of this surah have led to the creation of separate spaces for the sexes, with women and men occupying the private and public spheres of social life, respectively (Abu-Lughod 1993; Eickelman 1984; Franz 2005). Franz and Morokvasic argue that the private and public spheres remain strong parts of modern Bosnian society, which has always had strong patriarchal traditions of separation between men and women (Franz 2005; Morokvasic 1986). The result of these practices has been the creation of networks primarily made up of members of the same sex. Given their limited access to the public sphere, which is due to Islamic traditions and pre-Islamic patriarchal social structures, women's social networks have tended to consist of other women. Observations of current gender roles and ethnographic research suggest that the tradition of strong women's networks continues to flourish in Bosnia today.

Despite the fact that the Ottomans left Bosnia over a hundred years ago, many of the systems that guided proper social behaviour among the sexes during their reign remain integral to social interactions in 21st century Sarajevo. This is best exemplified in the creation of women's groups. During my research I became a part of one such group whose members were primarily unmarried young women who called themselves 'vjernice', or 'believers'. 'Vjernica' is used to refer to a woman who observes Islamic belief and practice. While the term vjernica is self-prescribed, it usually implies several basic elements, including: 1) belief in Allah as the only God and creator of all things, 2) observance of some of the main Islamic holidays, including Ramadan and Eid Mubarak, 3) declaring oneself a Muslim. In the group that I belonged to, the term vjernica also included a number of additional defining requirements. From observation and discussion, I identified these as including the following items: A) prescribed prayer five times a day, B) no alcohol consumption for life, C) no fornication before marriage, and D) observance of all laws as prescribed by the Qur'an. While I cannot be sure that all of the primary rules were observed by the group members, discussion and participant observation suggested that the majority were indeed followed. Our meetings were centred on discussions of faith, belief and practice, and generally included a group prayer at a nearby mosque or attendance of a religion-oriented event.

Entering this network of women who considered themselves discriminated against by mainstream society was an important step in conducting my fieldwork among religious women. Becoming part of this network was facilitated by my connections at Nahla, a women's educational organisation. At Nahla I attended the School of Islam, whose systematic educational programme gave me the opportunity to perfect my knowledge of Islamic belief, practice and life. In addition, the skills and knowledge I acquired at the school enabled me to participate in conversations centred on religious belief and practice.

One such occasion when I used knowledge acquired at the School of Islam was in March 2008 at one of the few cafes in Sarajevo where alcohol is not served. Our group met in places that it deemed moral so as to be in the company of like-minded people. During one such gathering, thirteen young women between the ages of 21 and 27 sat together in a large circle drinking coffee and tea. One of my primary informants, Amira, had been thinking of different ways for us to draw more youth towards faith. While this type of top-

ic had never been brought up before, it was very well received; the entire group became engaged in the conversation. During the next hour, suggestions of classes, meeting places, and mentorships were brought up as possible solutions. Women in the group clearly felt empowered. Since mainstream society did not allow them a space where their voices could be heard, they created their own, in which they felt free to speak, organise, and consequently take action. I asked Amira later why she had brought up this topic, and she answered that the lack of morality she witnessed on a daily basis was her primary motivation for wanting to do something about it. She also conveyed to me that there were fewer and fewer young people who were religious, or who even knew anything about Islam. She therefore felt that it was important to create a network in which young people felt safe and not judged for their possible lack of knowledge about religious faith and practice. The women of the group later took their ideas and have since begun organising within the support network of Nahla, the woman's educational organisation mentioned earlier. As they are currently in the planning and strategic stage, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about their effect outside the group. However, their speaking and organising activities clearly exemplify their efforts to become active agents of change.

This type of small-group network is only one example of the ways in which young women in Bosnia express their identities not only as Muslims, but as educated, caring, and revolutionary beings. In secular societies, religiosity is often seen as working against state formation; however, these young women are actively building community networks and institutions that serve important social roles in the state. Their efforts to organise forums to help others exemplify this type of personal agency.

4. Agency through the Veil

Sunni Islam, which has been practiced in the Balkan region for over 600 years, rests on five basic principles that guide and determine one's dedication to the monotheistic God (Allah). These five principles are: Shahadah (profession of faith), Salah (ritual prayer), Zakah (giving alms to the poor), Sawm (fasting during Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). They are the building blocks of Islam as a faith, and of each Muslim as an individual. Of the five, only the Hajj is optional, because not every Muslim can afford to make the pilgrimage. While these five principles make up the foundation of Islamic belief and practice, the Qur'an and the Haddiths¹ contain innumerable rules and regulations that are considered to be important parts of being a Muslim. They fall into two categories: farz and sunnet. Farz refers to obligatory practices, while sunnet are optional deeds that would please Allah if done, but would not necessarily increase one's chances of entering heaven in the afterlife.

The most common answer given by women when asked why they veiled is 'to please Allah'. One of the informants said, '*I do this for Allah, this is farz (obligatory)*'. Muslims throughout the Islamic world see the notion of the veil as an obligatory practice. As a farz, the veil is assigned to all Muslim women regardless of their race, ethnicity or geographic location. To these women, the veil is not just an obligation, but also a practice that will ensure their way into heaven. Entering the next life with a good record is an important part of the practice of veiling. The veil is not a burden to these women, but part of daily life. Many of my informants described the veil in relation to some of the other practices that have been prescribed by the Qur'an and the Haddiths. One informant said,

The rules of Islam are for our own good; fill your belly with 1/3 food, 1/3 water, and 1/3 air – that way you will never overeat; it also says not to drink, because when we drink alcohol we do bad things. Islam is for our own good, it helps us lead better lives.

Wearing a veil is not tantamount to separating oneself from the world, according to my informants, but a way to lead a moral life. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the veil is not seen as a necessity by these women, but a practice that leads to a good, healthy life. By veiling themselves, they fall in line

1 A collection of the sayings of the prophet Muhammad that, along with accounts of his daily practices (the Sunna), constitutes the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran. Oxford University Press, 2006 Concise Oxford English dictionary. Pp. 1 CD-ROM. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press..

with what constitutes a good life. Conversations about the veil would often lead to discussions about how numerous Bosnian women – both young and old – wear clothes that not only objectify them, but also project an image that does not reflect who they really are. The veil is not a burden, but a part of a well-orchestrated life, with a specific role and purpose, that simply helps Muslims lead better lives and ensure a favourable outcome on judgment day.

One of the most common misconceptions about the veil is that it has been forced upon women by their male relatives or husbands. Out of the fifteen women that I interviewed, only one woman said that her family had asked her to wear a veil, but that they had allowed her to make the final decision herself. In this case, she was a woman of 24 and had only recently begun to wear a veil, in September of 2007. Despite her family's religiosity, and despite their asking her to veil herself much earlier (when she was 14), her final decision to wear the veil was the result of a two-year process in which she slowly began to consider her duties and responsibilities as a Muslim woman. Her decision to wear the veil was a gradual process in which she began by wearing more modest clothes and not showing any of her curves. The final decision to veil herself came to her in a dream, and much like some of the other women I had interviewed, she talked about the 'feeling' and a sense of happiness when she finally decided that this would be the day that she would finally put on the veil.

While the veil in modern, secular, post-war Bosnia is still fairly new, many of the women I spoke to believe that its acceptance and popularity among women will only grow with time. Many of my informants said that the veil is very common in rural areas of Bosnia, but that the rural customs could not be compared to the veiling practices in urban areas. Several women distinguish between what they call the 'uneducated' veil versus the 'educated' veil. The former is meant to apply to the veil in rural areas of Bosnia, where it is often forced upon women; detractors consider this practice outdated and unenlightened. Interestingly enough, this particular argument is thought to apply to Muslims in Bosnia by the outside world. It is images of the women from rural areas with their colourful scarves loosely placed over their heads, necks exposed, wearing 'dimijas' (Turkish-style wide pants commonly worn in rural areas) that have circled around the world. The young veiled women of Sarajevo eschew these images, claiming that they have tainted the veil for the urban, college-educated women who, through personal struggle and sacrifice, have begun donning the veil voluntarily despite the stereotypes and prejudice imposed upon them.

Even though the veil is currently more common on the streets of Sarajevo than it was during the socialist period, the numbers of veiled women are not as high as many would believe. Even though the centre of Sarajevo hosts the largest number of mosques and religious institutions in the country, including the Faculty of Islamic Studies and the Madrassa (Islamic High School), the number of veiled women in comparison to non-veiled women is very minute. As a result, some of the experiences of veiled women are negative. One of my informants spoke of a situation in which she and her friend, who was also veiled, were spat on by a passing man. While this situation may seem insignificant in comparison to reports of women whose veils have been pulled off their heads, it is nonetheless an indicator of the lack of acceptance of the veil. In another interview, an informant spoke of a situation in which she was told that she could use her fingerprint in lieu of a signature on an official government form. This case once again indicates the stereotype of a veiled woman as uneducated: because she was wearing a veil, she was assumed to be illiterate. The irony of this particular situation is that the veiled woman in question had a master's degree in foreign languages and was fluent in three, including Arabic and English.

I conducted a few interviews with women who are not veiled but observe the overwhelming majority of the required and recommended Islamic practices. These interviews yielded a few interesting conversations in which women said that they had decided against the veil as a result of the conflict that would arise with family members, in most cases parents, who object to it. A few of the women I interviewed told me that pleasing one's parents and keeping on good terms with them (despite their opposition to the veil) is more important than the veil. The veil, as one of my informants put it, is 'just a rag', nothing to create such a fuss over. Many women have indicated that if the veil presents a problem at home, then a Muslim woman can still stay true to her faith by abiding by the other rules prescribed by Islam. The veil should

not be a barrier in any way, but an addition to a healthy life free of sexual objectification. As one of my informants (who is not veiled) put it, '*Sometimes I don't want to take it off when I walk out of the mosque after prayer; I feel protected, and my heart is filled with love for Allah*'.

This suggests that the veil is not only a source of external benefits for these women, but internal ones as well. To please Allah by obeying the laws he created is a reward in itself to observant Muslims. By this rationale, all the problems associated with family, friends and work no longer matter; as one informant said, 'This world is only a practice run for the next one.' One could argue that there is no need to bother with what anyone else thinks as long as one knows one is pleasing God. According to this view, no punishment, prejudice or mistreatment in this world can compare to the punishment that Allah will inflict upon those who do not obey his rules. Despite their struggles to be accepted within greater society, the veiled women of Sarajevo continue to defy accepted social practices that mirror western-type behaviour and religious practice.

5. Conclusion

Numerous ethnographies have been written about Muslim women. All of them have in one way or another dealt with the issues of gender, religiosity and power. This is primarily the result of the fact that Muslim women's lives are defined by their religious affiliation to Islam. Moreover, because of the strong patriarchal nature of Islam, Muslim women's lives are inextricably defined by their gender role. It is precisely because of religion and gender roles that so many ethnographies explore the issues of power within Muslim women's lives. In the West, strict gender roles and high degrees of religious belief and practice are often associated with lack of power. Consequently, research on Muslim women's lives nearly always involves discussions of power and agency. My research project shows some of the ways in which Bosnian Muslim women find agency and move away from the negative image that has been ascribed to them by both internal and external scholarship.

In my research, I have explored many topics related to women's daily lives and their religious identification. Despite a full year of fieldwork, I have only scratched the surface of what it is that defines Muslim women in Bosnia today. While I also spoke to secular women in Bosnia who identify themselves with Islamic tradition, I was unable to do justice to their experiences and stories within the scope of this paper. Agency, and therefore the ability of women to see themselves as actors within contemporary Bosnian society, is a topic that needs further exploration. My research highlights some of the ways in which this agency is exercised in these women's lives. Far too much research has portrayed the Muslim woman as a victim without a voice. Further research should focus on the sources of strength and power in the lives of Muslim women. In this paper I attempted to convey some of the instances of this power and strength, as well as the ways in which Muslim women in Bosnia have tried to dispel the images that paint them as ignorant, uneducated and voiceless.

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