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Muslim Women's Religious and Feminist Identities: A Study of Muslim Feminism in the Bosnian Context

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Muslim Women's Religious and Feminist Identities:
A Study of Muslim Feminism in the Bosnian Context

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Abstract

This research paper explores Muslim Feminism in Bosnia Herzegovina as a phenomenon that has been developing in the past ten years or so among Muslim women.

The introduction to this paper defines the concept of Muslim feminism and examines how women's identities as Muslim believers and their identities as women fighting for gender equality (i.e.: feminists) shape and determine one another.

I then move on to examine my ethnographic research methodology and my self reflections from the field.

Later, I give an account of the history of feminism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I pay particular attention upon the noticeable absence of literature on this topic and on the recent appearance of this phenomenon in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The remaining part of the paper examines my research findings from my interviews with 11 Bosnian Muslim women.

I first focus on the development of feminist conscience among my consultants, first from their standpoints as different professionals from different areas of expertise (i.e.: doctors, philosophers, historians, etc.) and afterwards from their position as women living in the context of patriarchal society.

I then focus on the trouble with the concept of feminism and with the term "feminist" in Bosnia and Herzegovina to move on to a discussion on how negative perceptions of feminism influence women's decision to declare themselves as feminists or not.

Then, I examine women's perspectives on the complementary nature of feminism and Islam and on the attainable possibility of reaching gender equality within the context of Islam.

At last, I present my overall conclusions, in which I reaffirm the validity of understanding my consultants' identities within the framework of Muslim feminism and where I suggest ways to further develop the research presented in this paper.

To Lucy Creevey and Karen Waldron

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Introduction

The present paper presents my findings from the ethnographic research I conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) for the period of approximately one month between April and May 2006. The focus of my research was exploring Muslim women's religious and feminist identities in the Bosnian context. There are several reasons that motivated me to choose this topic as my research topic.

The first one was my interest in furthering my understanding of different world feminisms. I refer to "feminisms" in the plural form because I believe that since women's cultural and social realities differ from one country to another, their needs and priorities as feminists vary substantially from one country to another. Therefore, only by referring to different feminisms can feminism as a movement for gender justice and equality exist. The second reason that motivated me to carry out this research was to understand how women's identities as feminists were shaped by their identities as Muslim women.

Coming from a Roman Catholic background where following the doctrine of Catholicism goes, many times, hand in hand with accepting the institutionalization of gender inequality, some of the questions I pondered in this respect were whether my research consultants would find contradictions between their beliefs in gender equality and their beliefs in the doctrine of Islam. Coming from Argentina and the US, where many times people's religious beliefs determine their views on women's rights to sexual education, contraception and abortion, I wondered if the same kind of phenomenon would occur among Muslim women in BiH.

My research findings show me that women's religious identities do not stand in opposition to their feminist identities. Quite the contrary, women's identities as Muslim

believers complement and determine their identities as feminists. Even in the cases in which women declared that they did not practice their religion, they did not find any antagonisms between fighting for gender equality in society and being religious. In their views, it was in fact possible to achieve gender equality within the context of Islam.

On the one hand, women's identities as Muslim believers complement their identities as feminists because in most cases, women find Islam to be a vehicle through which they can advance gender equality in their society. On the other, their identities as Muslim believers determine their identities as feminists because their religious identities determine, in many cases, their needs and priorities as women fighting for gender equality. In other words, women's priorities and needs as feminists are not limited to demands such as equal rights before the law and equal social and economic opportunities. They also include, for example, demands for the right to choose to wear the hidjab, demands for a reinterpretation of the Koran that would show Islam's egalitarian message and concerns in regards to the advancement of religious fundamentalism or Wahhabism in BiH.

All these characteristics correspond to a particular stream of Muslim feminism, defined by Zilka Spahić Šiljak in this way: "Muslim Feminism calls for a liberal orientation of Islam, basing it on the time and place in which one lives. Muslim feminism argues that our representation of Islamic centuries has occurred through the prism of patriarchal models of life, which does not mean that that is an authentic picture of Islam. In this belief it is necessary to focus on the texts of the Koran and its writings, breaking from the influence of Patriarchy. Muslim feminism sees women and men as the same essential being, with the same intellectual potential and skills. It says that you need to

read the Koran from another perspective and in the time of the social context of the society, based on historical-critical methods. Just this kind of principle can bring emancipation to women in Muslim societies.” (Spahić Šiljak 2004: 7).

I interviewed a total of 10 women in BiH, in the cities of Sarajevo, Zenica and Tuzla. Due to the fact that one of my research consultants was out of the country during my stay in Bosnia, she sent me her answers to my questions via e-mail. In order to protect consultants’ identities, I have chosen to utilize pseudonyms to refer to them throughout this essay. All of my research consultants came from a variety of sectors that deal with women’s issues in BiH, such as the non-governmental, governmental and academic sectors. As such, their areas of expertise varied widely, and included law, medicine, psychology, philosophy, history, etc.

Their views on religion and feminism were also diverse among my consultants. Although all of them declared themselves as believers in God, their levels of religiosity varied. Whereas some consultants declared that they did not practice their religion, others declared religion to be the most important aspect of their lives. At the same time, not all of them declared themselves as feminists. In fact, I encountered almost an equal number of consultants that declared themselves as feminists (six) and that did not (five). Because of this, it is hence fundamental to define the concept of feminism as understood and used in this research.

As Gisela Kaplan explains in Feminist Nationalisms, “broadly, feminism certainly was, and still is, a political challenge, and/or a blueprint for political action. Much of feminist practice and theory holds that gender inequality contradicts notions such as equality, freedom citizenship and justice. Feminism is an argument for women’s

autonomy and signifies a standpoint of *dissent*, containing the hope for a liberation of women with a view toward challenging all human relationships for the better.” (Kaplan 1997: 5). When taking this definition into consideration, it is then possible to state that women who declare that they believe in gender equality, that they believe in gender justice, that they care about women’s issues, that they work on the improvement of women’s status in society, that they work on the implementation of women’s human rights, are feminists, even if they do not use the term “feminist” or “feminism” to define themselves and their work respectively. Yet, because of the different connotations that have been attached to feminism as a term throughout history, which have determined feminism to be a derogatory (Kaplan 1997: 60) and at times, exclusionary term, some of my research consultants found reluctance to declare themselves as feminists.

The first part of this paper focuses on women’s reasons for addressing the importance of women’s issues, first from their perspectives as professionals belonging to various fields of expertise and afterwards from their personal experience as women in their society. The second part focuses on the concept of feminism. I first pay attention to the stigma attached to the term in the Bosnian context and from there I move on to discuss women’s embracement and reluctance of the concept of feminism and of the term “feminist” as a means of identification. The third part of this paper focuses on women’s unanimous view on the actual possibility of achieving gender equality within the context of Islam.

I will now turn to an account of my research methodology and self-reflections from the field. I will afterwards refer to my literature review on the history of feminism in BiH to turn then finally to a discussion on Muslim women’s religious and feminist

identities. I will draw heavily from my interviews, enabling my consultants to speak for themselves.

Research Methodology and Self-Reflections

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper is based on the ethnographic research I conducted in BiH for the period of one month between April and May 2006 on the responses of 11 Bosnian Muslim women from the cities of Sarajevo, Zenica and Tuzla. My research focused on the analysis of qualitative rather than quantitative data. Because of this, and with the exception of one of them due to the fact that she was out of the country during my research period, I utilized semi-structured interviewing as a research methodology with all of my research consultants.

I began my research with an interview questionnaire guide which I assumed I would only slightly modified as my research developed. However, the more my research evolved, the more I modified the questions I originally had and the more I added new ones. For example, after one of my first interviews, I realized it was relevant to my research to ask women about their perspectives on Wahhabism and on the nikab.

I also realized the importance of paying attention to the different ways in which one same question can be asked in order to avoid unsuitable misleading terminology. For example, after my first meeting, I decided to replace the question “what do you think about the re-traditionalization of women’s roles in society?” with the question “what is your view on women who choose not to have a career outside the home when they have the opportunity to do so?” My aim, in both cases, was to become acquainted with my consultants’ views on women who choose to work as full-time housewives and/or

mothers. Yet, while the latter question is out-right objective, the former can be misleading, and in fact it was the sole time I asked it. This is because it includes the word “re-traditionalization.” The meaning of the term “traditional” has at times had negative connotations, it has been associated with the ideas of “close-mindedness” and “backwardness.” Therefore, although it was never my intention to refer to the idea of “re-traditionalization” in a pejorative way, I realized that because there had been derogatory connotations attached to it before, it was necessary to change the wording of my question.

At the beginning of my research, most of my questions were open-ended. Although most of the time this type of questions worked very well, as my research developed I realized that, in some cases, when questions were too open-ended they ended up being confusing or not clear at all. For example, I realized that instead of asking my consultants “what is your view on Western feminism?” it was better to ask them about their views on the premises Western feminists have fought for, for example, in the United States, such as sexual and reproductive rights.

Before the start of my research, I referred to my research topic as “a study of Bosniac women’s religiosity and feminist identity.” As my research developed, I realized that it was mistaken to refer to my consultants as “Bosniac women.” I realized that to refer to them as “Bosniacs” was mistaken because first, the term “Bosniac” refers to a national identity, which I have not chosen to focus on in my research. I did not come across this topic in almost any of my interviews. The only time when I did, my consultant stated that she was confident with declaring herself as a Muslim but not so sure about

declaring herself as a Bosniac¹. I focused on women's religious identities, and therefore to refer to them as "Muslim women" rather than "Bosniac women" is actually correct.

I was a complete outsider to the community I was studying. Because of this, establishing a personal connection with my consultants (in some cases through my research mentor, in some others through my academic director and in some others through my consultants), was very important in two different ways. First, in terms of having my consultants to agree to meet with me and second, in terms of shortening the distance between the community I was studying and myself as the researcher.

The fact that I was an outsider did not present major obstacles to me throughout my research, except in one occasion in which one of my expected interviewees refused to meet with me when I mentioned I was doing research on "women and Islam in Bosnia." Although at first I was surprised that she refused to meet with me, I afterwards reflected on the fact that introducing my research topic that way would make not only this woman refuse to meet with me, but probably others too. This is because although as an outsider I approached the community I was studying with respect, others, be it researchers or journalists from the West, have presented and still present an orientalized image of Muslim women and a distorted image of Islam that does not make any kind of contributions to the scholarship but that reinforces dehumanizing stereotypes.

After this experience, I understood the importance of clearly explaining the scopes of my research and of avoiding terminology that could potentially make my consultants refuse to meet with me. In this sense, and due to the different connotations that have been attached to it as has been previously explained, I purposefully avoided the use of the term "feminism" when introducing my research subject. Instead, I usually

¹ Interview with Jasna, 5/2/2006.

utilized the different definitions of feminism that I understand. For example, when contacting women by phone, I usually said that I was doing research on “women’s activism in BiH” or when contacting them by e-mail I stated that I was doing research on “Muslim women who consider themselves believers and who work on women’s issues in different sectors, such as NGOs and the academia.” Once we met, I explained in further detail first, what was the focus of my research, and secondly that I focused on gender studies at my home college and that this research project was part of the completion requirements for a Gender Studies program with the School for International Training I had been enrolled in for the past few months.

As previously stated, I was a complete outsider to the community I was studying. My consultants’ and my own cultural background and life experiences are completely different. However, I do share with them the same value system in regards to gender justice and equality. Addressing this commonality between us shortened the distance between my position as the researcher and their positions as the consultants and made our communication possible. Due to the issues I study and because of the work they do, our cultural differences did not act as communication barriers at any time. There were only two times in which our linguistic differences became a communication barrier, reason for which I necessarily had to seek for the help of translators. All other interviews were conducted in English.

Literature Review: A Brief History of Feminism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

I reviewed a series of selected chapters from seven different books, a Master's thesis and a PhD dissertation on the topics of women, gender, feminism and identity in the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

A common pattern I noticed amongst almost all of my sources was the prominent absence of reference to the development of the feminist movement in BiH. According to Benderly (1997), the feminist movement in the former Yugoslavia started in the late 1970's, and was the strongest one in Eastern Europe. This was mainly due to the fact that in comparison to other countries in the Communist block, Yugoslavia had free borders and therefore presented much greater openness to the rest of the world in every sense of the word, which enabled "free exchange and communication of people and ideas" (Papić 1994: 20). Yugoslavia was hence up to date with the occurrences of contemporary cultural and political trends and by the late 1970's there was the presence of "a student's movement, new leftist politics, youth counter-culture, various sub-cultures [...] and [...] also [...] feminism" (Papić 1994: 20).

Prominent feminist initiatives were found in the cities of Belgrade, where the first international feminist conference in Yugoslavia took place in 1978 (Litch and Drakulić 2002) and where in 1981 the Feminist Group Women and Society was formed (Benderly 1997). They were also found in Zagreb, where in 1978 feminists created the Women and Society branch of the Croatian Sociological Society (Benderly 1997), as well as in Ljubljana, where feminist writings appeared in various student publications and scholarly journals (Benderly 1997). However, at the same time, by the late 1970's and early

1980's, the presence of the feminist movement in Sarajevo was inexistent (Benderly 1997, Helms 2003).

Women from Sarajevo did participate in feminist conferences in other Yugoslav republics, published feminist writings and were acquainted with feminist literature (Helms 2003), but a feminist movement per se did not develop as in the cities of Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana (Helms 2003). In these three cities, although the feminist movement did find resistance from the Communist Party's official women's organization (the Conference for the Social Activity of Women), it was not suppressed (Benderly 1997). A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that the political climate in Sarajevo by the 1970's was "much more closed than in the other cities at the time due to attempts to suppress Bosnia's political cleavages and the republican government's strict loyalty to the party-state" (Helms 2003: 57).

As Benderly explains, quoting Croatian feminist writer Slavenka Drakulić, the "six mortal sins of feminism" in the context of Communist Yugoslavia were "imported ideology, love for power, elitism, uninstitutional activity, apoliticization, and excluding the women's question from class." (Benderly 1997: 70). With the advent of Communist Yugoslavia after World War Two, the woman's question was addressed from "top down", as part of the greater Communist ideology of equality and equity, which viewed women's unequal status in society as part of the class issue (Benderly 1997; Kešić 2001, Helms 2003). Women gained equality before the law, the right to vote in 1946 and the right to free, accessible and legal abortion in 1978 (Kešić 2001).

However, although the Communist government in Yugoslavia provided women with rights that in other countries, such as the United States, feminists had to fight for

(Helms 2003), and in that sense gender equality was, legally speaking, institutionalized, patriarchal gender relations went unnoticed and gender equality was not fully achieved (Kešić 2001; Helms 2003). As Benderly emphasizes, “Yugoslav women were free to be workers, mothers, heroines of the partisan war and shoppers all rolled into one. But they were not free to ask ‘what do we women want our lives to be?’” (Benderly 1997: 68). For example, problems such as violence against women in the domestic sphere were not addressed by the state. They were instead tackled by feminists through the creation of SOS phone lines in the 1980’s in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana (Benderly 1997; Kešić 2001).

As I could notice from my own experience and as Helms points out in her PhD dissertation, the presence of Muslim women in feminist initiatives in the 1970’s and 1980’s is also conspicuously absent from the literature on feminism in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Helms 2003). However, women’s organizing in BiH dates back to the second half of the 19th century, where humanitarian and educational associations were many times organized according to religious or ethnic background (Helms 2003).

Between World War One and World War Two, societies of intellectuals in Sarajevo took the “emancipation” and education of Muslim women as their main premise (Helms 2003). They provided with scholarships and female dormitories in order to make it possible for women to attend university (Helms 2003) and also “branched out into political and feminist campaigns through which they joined international feminist movements of the 1920's and 30's [...] these groups were the first to agitate for civic and political rights for women, including voting rights [...] Muslim women are seldom mentioned in these accounts, despite the fact that there did seem to exist a few urban,

educated Muslim women in Sarajevo and other towns who did not veil or confine themselves within the high walls of their houses [...] as many Muslim women did at the time” (Helms 2003: 54).

During World War Two, Muslim women were active participants in the Anti Fascist Front of Women and after the war was over, they focused much of their activities in “campaigns to abolish the wearing of veil faces and the confinement of Muslim women” (Helms 2003: 55).

As previously mentioned, although feminist movements flourished in the cities of Belgrade, Ljubljana and Zagreb in the late 1970’s and 1980’s, they did not do so in the city of Sarajevo. In addition to Helms’ analysis that such a phenomenon might have been the consequence of a closed political environment and the government’s loyalty to the Communist party (Helms 2003), Zilka Spahić Šiljak highlights that also one of the reasons why Muslim women in BiH were not as active in feminist initiatives in comparison to women from Serbia and Croatia was also due to traditional and cultural premises that in many ways limited Muslim women’s access to public and political life.²

Women’s and -what one may call- feminist initiatives in BiH bloomed during and after the 1992-1995 Bosnian war with the development of the non-governmental sector as a response to the atrocities that were being committed, particularly against women (Benderly 1997; Kešić 2001; Helms 2003). It would be obtuse to undermine the suffering of men as well in the context of the Bosnian war. Yet, it is important for the purpose of this project to highlight the position of women within the conflict in order to understand the development of civil society and that of female participation within it.

² Meeting with mentor, 5/9/2006.

According to Kešić, referring to Anthias and Yuval-Davis, “there are five major ways in which women participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices: a) as biological reproducers of the members of an ethnic collectivity; b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; c) as key participants in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences; and e) as participants in national, economic political and military struggles.” (Kešić 2001: 65). Categories from a) to d) serve as explanatory frameworks to understand the incidence of mass rape as a tactic of war in the nationalistic and genocidal projects that took hold of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990’s. “Woman” was understood as a signifier for “nation”, and therefore harm inflicted upon women’s bodies symbolized harm inflicted upon the entire community women belonged to in terms of their ethnic/religious backgrounds (Kešić 2001).

Women’s organizing in BiH in the form of non-governmental organizations responded not only to the needs of women whose physical and psychological integrities had been violated, but also to those of displaced persons, children, refugees and other populations in need (Andrić-Ružičić 1997). In the city of Sarajevo alone, when the Center for Women ŽAR began with its work at the beginning of the war in 1992, there were 10 NGOs that focused on women’s issues. By the end of it, in what is now the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, their number went beyond 50³.

On the one hand, while during Communist times in BiH women’s organizing and their participation in political life was suppressed, the immediate social necessities that arose from the war were catalysts for women to enter the public realm of life as active

³ Interview with Vasvija, 4/20/2006.

participants.⁴ The governmental structure and the political system collapsed, and such collapse enabled the formation of women's associations to start their work on women's rights⁵. On the other hand, while religion, and therefore women's religious identities, had been suppressed under Communism, the fall of the system enabled women to begin to recognize and live their religious identities in the public sphere.⁶

It is important to mention that while all religious and ethnic identities were suppressed under Communism under the motto of Yugoslavism, Muslim identity was particularly repressed and/or undermined in three different ways. First, in terms of the official government recognition of Bosnian Muslims as a distinct nation, which did not take place until 1971 (Bringa 1995). Second, through the undervaluing stereotypes of Muslims and Islam present among people from non-Muslim cultures in the rest of Yugoslavia and third, through the orientalist and undermining perceptions of Muslims embedded in the Yugoslav educational system (Bringa 1995). As Bringa notices in her ethnography of a village populated by both Muslims and Croats in central Bosnia "After 1990 [...] it transpired that some of my Muslim contacts had been feeling uncomfortable [...] with what they perceived as an anti-Muslim bias [...] particular Muslim cultural characteristics (such as modes of dress or speech) were branded old-fashioned. So the message inherent in the socialist progressive Yugoslav education system was that "muslimness" [...] belonged to the past and needed to be modernized or changed through education." (Bringa 1995: 77).

In the context of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, women see both the need for their recognitions as Muslim women as well as the need for their active engagement in

⁴ Meeting with mentor, 5/9/2006.

⁵ Interview with Amna, 4/21/2006.

⁶ Meeting with mentor, 5/9/2006.

civil society. The confluence of both of these priorities shows the beginning of the development of a feminist orientation that is at its core different from the types of feminist initiatives that developed in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. This is so due to the fact that, while the feminist initiatives that flourished in these ex-Yugoslav republics in the 1970's and 1980's were intrinsically secular, the type of feminism that is currently under development in BiH, finds religion to be a vehicle through which women's rights can be advanced through the gender equality discourse found in the Holy Book of Koran⁷. Women find themselves in a position where, on the part of the state, they find a legal framework that guarantees gender equality and where, on the part of religion, the re-examination and re-interpretation of the place they, as women, occupy within the religious discourse enables their civic and religious identities not to be mutually exclusive but complementary⁸. It is to a discussion of this phenomenon among my consultants that I now turn.

PART I: On the Fundamental Relevance of Women's Issues

Different Approaches, Same Interest: Looking at the World through Gendered Lenses

Different fields of expertise present amongst my consultants show different responses in regards to the importance of women's issues. Yet, although responses vary, the same ideological thread links all of them, as the examples below show it:

From the perspective of a lawyer:

⁷ Meeting with mentor, 5/9/2006.

⁸ Meeting with mentor, 5/9/2006.

“I started intensively working on women’s issues during the war, at the beginning of the war in 1992 and 1993, and the reason I started doing this is because by that time there were all kinds of violations of human rights and especially of women’s rights [...] I am especially interested in legislation, both the writing and the implementation of laws protecting women’s rights [...] then I began getting to know about the international conventions and that side of the law, which was something that was missing from our legal system, so I started working so that that would be implemented as a part of our system.” (Vasvija, translation).

From the perspective of another lawyer:

“First it, [my interest], was generally human rights and especially women’s rights, through these women’s rights it was for me [...] divorce and [...] property, what can we do with [the] [...] property they, [the spouses], made in marriage. Here in Bosnia is all, most I would say, 99% of this property they made in marriage it will [be] in [the] husband’s name, so after the death of the husband the women have less than they deserve and [the reason why I know] that is because I studied Law and I tried through these conventions or through other law acts [...] to find some way to help they, [women], and to [make] public [...] [their] rights.” (Refika).

From the perspective of a medical doctor:

“[...] I was always interested [in women’s issues], during the student period, my background is I’m a medical doctor but I specialize in social medicine, and actually now I am sub-specialize after that in health promotion and it comes [...] [down to] the

differences which you see during your practice because I am much more focused on the health of the groups because that is my profession; [doing] some research, analyzing of the population health, and then you realize disparities and inequalities which is prominent [...] During the war I was working with [...] [an] organization which basically implemented [a] program, it is originally [a] family planning organization but they are funded by the implementation of the program which actually was based on [the] Darbur Commission, and [the] Darbur commission was the group of investigators who came to Bosnia and Croatia to investigate the position of the women which are caught up in the war, and they recognized rape as an issue of the war situation and they started with a program in Croatia for the refugees from Bosnia and the women from Croatia who are caught up in the war [...] I started with that program first as social development coordinator [...] When I come to Sarajevo in 1996 actually I started to support many different NGOs [...] I actually worked a lot between policy and activism, it depends on the issue, let's say that I am active in vertical levels to put more pressure to change the policies [...]" (Indira).

From the perspective of a psychiatrist:

"I started during my work at the psychiatrist department in [...] [the] hospital where I was mostly in charge of the female department of psychiatry and when I realized that many disorders, psychological disorders, were somehow consequences of women not having their rights. So since that moment somehow I became aware of myself as a woman and aware of the situation in the world around and how the level of women and rights,

how much in fact they have or do not have rights in the world around them.” (Amna, translation).

From the perspective of a psychologist:

“[...] first I finished [as] gender equality trainer for children, and then [...] I start doing workshops in the primary school, secondary schools, and other non governmental organizations, and then I saw that there is a lot of gender inequality concerning the sexual rights of a woman [...] and then I finished for sexual reproductive trainer, so then I also start doing those workshops, and then step by step I start doing a lot of reading and research concerning the violence in the family, violence against women in the society, starting with the small things such as verbal violence, inappropriate touching at work, etc. up to those big situations when women are beaten up and raped. And then I start working as also raising awareness in regards to prostitution and trafficking [...] so in the end for the past five years I am doing workshops with children in the primary and secondary school considering those four topics, my special field of interest is violence against women [...]” (Lejla).

From the perspective of a philosopher:

“I must say I started with feminist issues theoretically, so that means dealing with some problems, the phenomena of nation, of politics of recognition and so on and I realized that you can’t grasp the whole thing without taking gender into account [women’s studies and dealing with women’s issues in the academia are][...] important for the subject matter, it’s quite almost [an] objective thing [...] [In regards to] multiculturalism, if you

look at [that], there is issues of recognition, groups, you don't get the right picture if you look at these groups as monolithics, you can't look at groups as "a group", every group consists of men and women, you have differentials in power and so on, so if you want to talk about those issues within the group you must see what is [the] impact on women [...] you can't get the full insight of the phenomenon if you [don't analyze the position of] women and men in that phenomenon. That's one thing, but then there is another thing [...] I think it is quite unfair to deal only with male philosophers, why? I'm a woman, why to read only male philosophers? I'm really interested in what women say about things like citizenship, what does it mean to be a woman, what a woman citizen has to see as well, are there some sexual rights, gender rights and so on. You have to differentiate the factor of citizenship along the gender lines as well, it's [a] very important question. One student [...] asked me "Oh professor but to introduce women in [the] curriculum does it mean that we lower the standards?" so if to introduce women only because these are women and I said "of course not." Introducing women writers doesn't mean that we lower the standards. Men make standards, they proclaim who is a great writer, there are lots of women who are great writers but who are not recognized, one thing. But another thing, I don't think so that they are less important, but even if they are worse writers I want to read them, I have [the] right to read them. Of course I don't think that women writers are worse than men writers but only that in the world there are world known writers that, even here, now, I don't know [...] maybe great female writers here [from] previous centuries. Maybe there are, but I don't know them [...]" (Nasiha).

From the perspective of a historian:

[...] I went to Women's Studies [...] it's something like a course six months long and it was something really, really new for me I learnt so many things about women's issues from the different [...] angles, points of view. So I decided that I can also do something about that and after that [...] I decided to work with my students sometimes [...] on subjects about women, women in the past, how they lived and things like that [...] Because history has very conservative sides [...] here in Bosnia that's the idea, that history has very conservative sides and is also men's world, there is no place for any woman in that world, but things are changed I think, and we have a lot of people who are today interested in things like women's issues [...] I think that we are on the beginning of the new age, with her story, not just his story." (Jasna).

The ideological thread that I identify at the beginning of this section and which I claim links all of the above responses is the interviewees' approach to their different disciplines from a gendered perspective. A gendered perspective entails that because the position of women and men has historically and socially been different, it is fundamental to recognize those differences in order to understand them so that different strategies for the advancement of gender equality and justice can be created and implemented. As can be appreciated from the above responses, such strategies vary according to different professional backgrounds and areas of expertise.

Taking Refika and Jasna as two comparative examples, it is possible to see that Refika's recognition of women's disadvantaged position in regards to property rights after divorce has led her to understand the importance giving legal advice to women in regards to their actual position before the law as a strategy through which to advance

gender equality. On the other hand, Jasna's recognition of the exclusion of women from history has led her to educate her students on the woman's side of history a way to advance gender equality within her area of expertise.

Different Lives, Same Stories: The Creation of Feminist Conscience from Personal Experience

It is not only different professions that lead women to consider women's issues as important, but also –and as the following examples will illustrate below, above all-, women's personal experiences as women in their society that determine their feminist consciences:

“I became interested in women's issues by maturing and becoming [a] woman – because I understood that my role in society and expectations from me are so ambivalent – I had to be strong but not to show it, I had to be sexual but to hide it, to be smart but not ambitious, etc. It is important because of general justice.” (Fatima).

“I believe I have always, let's say, been attached to women's issues, since the first [time] ever I was aware that I am a woman. I used to notice my family members, my mom's role, my grandma's role in the family. Very early I started asking questions, “why do you go to the market everyday? Why doesn't grandpa go to the market everyday?” something like that [...].” (Sanela).

“The Balkans is the realm of men power, of power that belongs to men, of patriarchy and you see things like that in all levels of the society, like in governmental structures and

down, so it's present everywhere, it's tradition [...] I felt the same in my cultural environment. I grew up in a Muslim traditional family, and I felt it, [patriarchy], on my own skin somehow. Personally I experienced in a way such a system [...] Since the very beginning from the moment when you come to this world, you as a female child, you have to fight for your rights, you have to fight for your rights first within the family, comparing to brothers, let's say, and to show that you need to be the same or even more compared to them. Then in your schooling, especially if you have male teachers, so somehow that you deserve to get a good mark enough for maybe more work than your male colleagues, and then later on at the work place [...]" (Amna, translation).

"[...] I was always interested [in women's issues] because I saw that there is a lot of inequality in the society, that is based on patriarchal society and not on logical thinking, for example, and in those days I met my friend, she was a member of [an NGO], and I went there, I met other women [...] and my first thinking in my head was "there is somebody who thinks like me", because at that moment I thought I was the only one who sees there is something wrong. There is something wrong when you have two children, for example, a son and a daughter, and you don't have the money to send both of them to school and you choose to send the son even if he is [a] worst student than your daughter, that there is something wrong with that [...]" (Lejla).

"[...] I became a conscious feminist the day I started to see, the day I opened my eyes and saw the differences that exist between men and women, and then I asked, I started to pose questions to myself and to the people around me about why it was like that, and my

first question was “is that the intention of God?” “is that the intention of God to separate women and men in this way?” and when I started to do research I found the opposite of the case: that it is the construction of us human beings and it is deeply culturally rooted, and it doesn’t, it has nothing to do with the intention of God [...] (Samira).

All of the above examples show that the foremost reason for women to become interested in and involved in women’s issues is their becoming aware of patriarchy and of the ways gender relations develop within this context. By becoming acquainted with this awareness, women become conscious of their disadvantaged position within society by the mere fact of being female. This personal consciousness of who they are and who they are expected to be by societal standards, becomes a political consciousness through women’s expression of their deep sense of social justice and through their involvement in women’s issues in various areas of public life.

PART II: Feminism: Trouble, Embrace and Reluctance

The Trouble with the Term “Feminist”

“[...] to be a feminist [in Bosnia] is something bad, people go like “Oh, she’s a feminist”, [...] [they say] “ [I’m] ok [with those] rights, it’s ok, I believe in [those] rights, I want to have [those] rights but I’m not [a] feminist. Don’t call me like that.” It’s a problem in the term [...] through the news, through the literature, feminism was something bad [...], especially this radical feminism, they say “these are ugly women who don’t have [a] husband” [...] here, it’s the picture [of] feminism [that it] is like that, [...] and they [i.e.: society] say if the woman is successful, economically independent and

has no husband something is wrong with her, “is she nervous? Oh that’s the PMS! or she needs a man, to teach her! Probably she is gay! Or she is a feminist!” (Refika).

“[...] when I was 17-18 [...] [which is when I started to get involved in activism], because of my way of thinking, [...] when I express[ed] my opinion, they say “oh, you are a feminist” I was like, “ok, what’s wrong with that?” First I knew why I was [a] feminist, but I didn’t know exactly why they are saying that because for me there wasn’t anything wrong with that, so when I start with my activism when I was 17-18 I didn’t have any problems with saying [...] in [...] discussions, round tables [...] “I am a feminist” or “I’m a sensitive feminist” and then people are starting to ask me “ok, what does it mean? What do you mean by ‘feminist’?” because the problem is that here, when you say feminist, [the] first idea is radical feminist. So when I say feminist, they are like “aha, ok, what do you mean by that?” and then when I explain usually I ask people “ok, are you for gender equality?” they say “yes!” “are you for equal opportunities in education, politics, economy, etc., etc.” they say “yes, of course” then I say “ok, I have news for you: you are [a] feminist. By definition, you are feminist, because feminists are nothing else than people, men and women, who are fighting for gender equality.” So I do have kind of steps back from people when I say that I’m a feminist, but I am trying to explain them in a way that they are going to understand and take it as something that is ok, that is good, that is friendly, that is not something that they should be scared of. But even if I explain it this way, there are still a lot of men and women who show [...] resistance.” (Lejla).

“[...] feminism is one word, but it means a lot of things, I know that for example men here in Bosnia when you mention “feminist” they are scared, [...] they have some sort of antagonism towards that term. Probably when thinking about Western feminism, maybe I am scared too when I hear some of them [(i.e.: Western feminisms)] [...]” (Sanela).

“[...] if I say to someone that I’m a feminist he or she will think “Oh she’s [a] lesbian or she is radical and she hates guys” and things like that, so [...] I don’t like that [...]” (Jasna).

The five examples above show how both men and women in Bosnia are skeptical towards the concept of feminism and the term “feminist” as a means of identification. As Helms underlines, in post-war Bosnia, to label someone as “feminist,” many times has a pejorative connotation and is “hurled around more like an insult, a way to dismiss or discredit someone, than a description of a legitimate ideological approach” (Helms 2003: 156). Helms’ analysis is intrinsically relevant to the above examples, in particular to those of Refika -who explains how the term “feminist” is in certain contexts used as an insult-, Lejla -who explains how at the beginning of her activism she was discredited by other people because of the fact that she identified herself as a feminist in public-, and Jasna -who also refers to how the term “feminist” has generally a pejorative connotation in Bosnian society-.

As pointed out by Spahić Šiljak, “women in general shy away from a feminist identity, because feminism in this region is understood as a pejorative term for such an idea, related to the radical forms (of feminism)” (Spahić Šiljak 2004:1). Such an analysis

is particularly applicable to the examples of Sanela and Jasna. Although, as will be seen below, Sanela does consider herself a feminist, Spahić Šiljak's analysis is relevant to her case due to the fact that Sanela points out how radical forms of Western feminism are perceived as aggressive by both women and men, which generates a general "fear" of feminism that makes people reject the idea altogether. Spahić Šiljak's analysis is even more relevant to the case of Jasna, for whom radical approaches to feminism drew her back from considering herself a feminist.

Would you Consider Yourself a Feminist?: Embrace and Reluctance

As explained in the former section, feminism carries generally a negative connotation in the context of Bosnia. As pointed out by Spahić Šiljak "when you ask a Bosnian-Herzegovinian woman, is she a feminist, you will usually get the answer: 'I am not, but I support the rights of women, equality of genders, etc.'" (Spahić Šiljak 2004:1). Not surprisingly, when asked this question, my consultants responses varied, including six who did identify themselves as feminists and five who did not. As the title of this section suggests, some interviewees embraced the term, such as Samira, to whom I did not even have to ask the question in order for her to outspokenly identify herself as a feminist, while others found reluctance towards this form of identification:

"I am [an] Islamic feminist, because I would do everything what I can to detect [the] real position in Islam of women and to re-educate Muslims to live by that." (Fatima).

[...] There are many definitions of feminists, and I believe yes, according to the definition I understand: I believe that everyone deserves equal opportunities, and I believe that also from my religious point of view, that God asks you for your deeds, not whether you are

men or women. So also from that point of view I believe [...] that we all should think what we do in our lives, what we do with our lives, regardless of that difference between men and women, so I believe that God asks for our deeds and that we should have equal opportunities [...] (Sanela).

“Yes, [I am a feminist], but I was even before [I started my work as a psychiatrist] aware of that. But especially in that moment, and since that moment, I was pushing the idea that women should be aware of themselves and their rights through the family and through society, supported at both levels, that of the family and that of society.” (Amna, translation).

“Yes, I am a feminist, but a sensitive one. Not a radical one [...] Anything that means radical I am almost opposite to that. For example, I am not for the supremacy of woman, I am for equality. I am for equal, for me equality is equal opportunities, I am not asking for anything more, I am just asking as I say, for a fair play, equal opportunities and that everybody has the same opportunities, the same start, and then we’ll see who is going to get where, and how long.” (Lejla).

“[...] feminism for me is a matter of justice, a matter where I fight for women’s rights, for women’s place, for women’s power, for women’s access to resources and I think that my conviction is that we live in an unjust society, in a patriarchal society, where women are subordinate to men and that is not just [...]” (Samira).

“Yes, I am a feminist! And I want to say it loud, very loud. I think that every woman is [a] feminist in the soul and feminism I see it like that: feminism is to understand what rights you have and to say [it] loud and to fight for [those] rights.” (Refika)

“In the past, yes, I said for myself that I’m a feminist but a bit after that I was thinking and I said to myself: ‘I don’t want to be part of any movement, any, any, any kind of movement’, why? Because I’m just one person; I want to act as an individual, and [the] feminist movement is not united, [...] you have different streams: lesbian, radical, liberal feminists [...] I think it is very important that I organize my life in a proper way, to [...] [be a] good example [on] how to live in a proper way [...] and [the] feminist movement is also important, but I think that women sometimes are saying things that I’m not agreeing with, because I met so many older women who just say ‘Ah, guys! they are so like this, like that!’ I think that is not a way to get [a] better life here in Bosnia. We have to speak with men, we have to talk with them, we have to tell them our ideas, our notions,[...] everything about us, so they can understand us and I think that is the only way that we can live together in harmony [...]” (Jasna).

“I will consider myself much more to [the] equality and solidarity perspective, and I see myself much more as [a] believer in equalities than like[a] particular feminist, I prefer to say that I am focused much more on gender like a concept and [the] issue of equality, where I see that different segments of disparities should be focused on [...] [such as] poverty, race, ethnicity, religion and many other things, which are so many inequalities. Also, men and women, I could much more see that construct which suffered mostly

women but also suffered all [...] who are under the pressure of inequality, so I much more say that I am oriented not as a particular feminist [...] so I prefer to call myself gender equality oriented [rather] than feminist [...] I think that there is a need that we could focus on the same opportunities and equalities in all intersections, which means race, ethnicity, culture, religion and everything; [...] I think in general I'm a fighter [for] solidarity and equality." (Indira).

"No, I wouldn't [consider myself a feminist]. Because there is a difference in our approach [in the institution I work for]: it's more [of a] gender and development approach, so we are not only working on the improvement of the position of women, we also want to improve the position of men in some areas [...] In some areas men are not well enough represented, for example in family life, women are those who take care of children, women are those who spend their time with children, etc. So we would like to improve the position of men in this sphere of life, so that they [take] care of children, so that they spend their time with children, because also this is something which is part of life, so we are not just like women oriented, it's more like gender equality, just to reach that level." (Zahida).

"I do not consider myself as a feminist because we are always thinking about the lobbying of both women and men, and our organization has focused our activities on women and children and that it is very important for us that those are the people who have benefit from our activities. But in our organizations we also enter into issues that involve the protection of men insofar as those men are not harming women and children,

and insofar as those men have found themselves in situations where their rights are being violated.” (Vasvija, translation).

“If you define feminism as [the] inclusion of women’s achievements, [as the] recognition that there are power differentials between men and women -although we can’t say that women are one group and that men are another group, there are other, a lot of differences within themselves of course-, and if you define feminism as a struggle for equality between women and men, then I think that I can recognize myself as a feminist, it depends how you define feminism [...] But [then] I don’t like labels, what I do is feminist but I don’t like to put labels on myself, the only labels I have are mother, professor. Although my students consider me as [a] strong feminist, for me it is normal that someone fights for just things, in that sense I’m not just [a] feminist, I want justice for all minority groups [...]” (Nasiha).

When taking the answers of Lejla and Indira as comparative explanatory examples, one may wonder why, if both women identify themselves as fighters for gender equality, the former identifies herself as a feminist and the latter does not. I believe that the problem lies in the fact that both women interpret the concept of feminism in completely different ways.

Nasiha’s example can serve as an analytical vehicle to interpret why just like her, Indira and four other women would not consider themselves feminists. Nasiha mentions that she “does not like to put labels on herself.” My interpretation of this statement is that putting the label of “feminist” means for her the adoption of an exclusionary identity,

non-inclusive of other struggles for justice within society. The fact that, as Gisela Kaplan explains in Feminist Nationalisms “feminism usually appears with additional labels to indicate specific ideological positions (for example, socialist, liberal, Marxist, radical)” (Kaplan 1997: 5) presents also a problem for Jasna, who finds these “additional labels” to represent a problematic fragmentation within the feminist movement and for Indira, who clearly states that she does not see herself as “a particular feminist”, that is, as I interpret it, as a socialist, liberal, etc. kind of feminist and which also denotes in a way an emphasis on the problematic fragmentation within the movement also found by Jasna. On the other hand both Vasvija and Zahida find that to identify themselves as feminists, due to the fact that they see it as an exclusionary term, does not take into consideration the fight for the rights of men and children as well. In all five cases, and from different perspectives, women interpret “feminism” as an exclusionary term that does not fully address what their concerns as women fighting for gender equality are.

On the other hand, those who do identify themselves as feminists like Lejla, understand feminism as a movement that focuses on equality of opportunities for both women and men in society. They do not find it an exclusionary term or concept, but quite the contrary, they believe it is a vehicle through which it is possible to achieve gender - and therefore-, social, justice. Due to the different standpoints present amongst my consultants in regards to the term “feminism” I consider it important to reiterate the definition of feminism I understand and through which I carry out this analysis.

I very much agree with Gisela Kaplan that “feminism certainly was, and still is, a political challenge, and/or a blueprint for political action. Much of feminist practice and theory holds that gender inequality contradicts notions such as equality, freedom

citizenship and justice” (Kaplan 1997:5) and that the overarching definition of feminism is therefore that of a movement for gender equality and gender justice. In this way, although five of the above examples show that women would not identify themselves this way, from my ideological and theoretical standpoint, I would definitely consider them feminists.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, I agree with the definition that “feminism is an argument for women’s autonomy and signifies a standpoint of *dissent*, containing the hope for a liberation of women with a view toward challenging all human relationships for the better.” (Kaplan 1997: 5). Having said this, because human relationships entail the relationships between women, men and children, feminism is therefore not a movement exclusive to women but to *all* of society as such. In the case of Zahida, for example, although she does not consider herself a feminist, she definitely fits into this definition: her gender equality work is not only focused on improving the well being of women but also that of men in the private realm in order for them to nurture care taker roles that are, in the context of patriarchal gender relations, usually performed by women.

PART III: The Gender Equality Discourse within the Religious Discourse: Attaining Gender Justice Within the Context of Islam

As stated in the introduction, levels of religiosity amongst my consultants varied. Some of them declared they believed in God but did not practice their religion while others said that religion was the most important aspect of their lives. Regardless of their level of religiosity, all of them agreed on the fact that for them the concepts of feminism

and religion are not mutually exclusive (as many feminists claim the West) and that it is possible to achieve gender equality within the context of Islam:

“I really don’t think [that religion and feminism are mutually exclusive], because I think that the main dimension of [the] actual intersection which creates disparities are [the] interpretations of religion, not religions themselves [...] I think that there is so much to tell, particularly [...] women theologians should [have] so much to tell, particularly in [the] interpretation of some religions, because they are basically sometimes not coming from the roots of the religion, they are coming from the roots of the ruling segments of religion, of the power of the religion, not from religion by origin [...]” (Indira).

“I think there is no obstacle to be a feminist and to be religious at the same time, why? I know that people from Europe and the United States maybe think that Muslims are very orthodox, [that they] are very conservative[...] but I think that in Islam women have really quite a lot of rights [...] I’m satisfied with my life, with my religion and with my rights here and I think that we can combine that [...], our religion and our ideas about feminism [...] I think [...] If you have really bad interpretations you have to point that to other people, you have to write about that, you have to speak about that, because some people don’t know really what is religion, what are the basics of Islam [...] I think that people don’t know really what is the proper way of life according to Islam, so they have to read more about that, and also they have to read feminist authors [...]” (Jasna).

“[...] There is something which is religion in its essence, on one hand. On the other hand, is how we live that religion, [...] when I say live religion I mean do we really live in accordance to that religion? So it’s two different things. First thing, it’s something which are these principles, which are to be respected and from my point of view I found it like a liberation. I believe that Islam is a liberation to women, because in Islam woman is fully respected, [...] from every side she is protected, and should be respected in that way. On the other hand, you have a situation of [a] completely different position of woman in [the] Islamic world, and we have many juxtapositions here [...] I believe that the interpretation of certain religious principles is wrong and that it has been wrong for centuries, it is not [just] right now, the situation that is happening now has been happening for a long, long time [...] It is possible [to achieve gender equality within the context of Islam], and I believe that women should more recall the religious principles and influence the society throughout the world, [...] whether throughout the religious world, whether throughout the NGO sector or whatever, I believe that really Islam is in its essence a liberation to women [...]” (Sanela).

“[...] both of them [Islam and feminism] together, they can live very well, somehow they can improve each other [...] men and women are equal in front of God, it’s just a matter of interpretation of the Koran [...]” (Amna, translation).

“I think it is [possible to advance gender equality within the context of Islam], because you have one part in the Koran, one id that says “believers...”, but both towards men and women, in the male and female form “...are friends to each other and they are

advising themselves”, etc., etc. [...] That id is completely about gender equality, so I think that it is able to promote gender equality through Islam with the right interpretation, but the thing is that that id and other ids, where you have clearly explained gender equality, are not used, are not interpreted at all, people don't know about them. For example here in Bosnia if you ask men about [the] Koran, they say “oh yes, you have to obey me, you have to listen to me, I have the right to hit you and to have four women and I have to find a virgin wife!” but they don't know that an unclean person can't ask for a clear wife. If you had a woman before, if you ever had sex, then you don't have the right to ask for a clear wife by Islam. But nobody is saying that. And if you talk about four wives, they say, “if I have four wives, for example, each one has to be treated equally, so if I can give equally to every wife, money, things, apartment, house, whatever, then I can have four wives”. But can you split your heart in four [parts], [...] can you love every woman equally? No. But if you want to have four wives you have to be equal with every one of them, and if you can't be equal in your heart, then you can't have four wives. And nobody is saying that. So I think that there are lots of ids that are talking about gender equality in Islam, and that gender equality could also be promoted through Islam, through religion with the right interpretation, in a very nice way [...]” (Lejla).

“[...] I think it's not true [that it is not possible to achieve gender equality within the context of Islam] [...] it doesn't exclude each other, I'm definitely not with it [...] I think that if people really stick to the Book, I mean to [the] Koran, gender equality would be somehow achieved, but different interpretations of the Book really make a mess in people's heads, and then you have some kind of [...] [views] when they say that women

are not equal or, I really hear it often “In Islam women are inferior to men, and it’s according to Islam.” I don’t think so, because following what I read I really think that Islam is not an obstacle for women to be equal to men. You have so many examples of successful women, of religious women. So I think that you can be both successful, professional women and be religious, it doesn’t exclude each other [...] I think it is a matter of interpretation [...]” (Zahida).

“I believe that there is space for both [feminism and Islam], and the benefits are biggest if you do both: we need [a] new interpretation of the Koran, but then we have to act based on that. If the woman, for example, is obligated to use the “brain” and learn as much as man do (not only to stay at home and raise the children), we must act based on that: to learn but to advocate learning for women as well [...] [It is] absolutely [possible to achieve gender equality within the context of Islam], God created us equal [...]” (Fatima).

[...] I find not conflict [between Islam and feminism], and to me they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary I would like to say that they complement each other, they strengthen each other, at least in my case. I find a lot of energy for my feminist work in religious discourse, in the Holly Book, and on the other side I understand the Holly Book as an encouragement to work with these issues [...] My feminism, and that is the broad definition of feminism, is that there is an unjust division of power and resources between men and women in the world and since religions [...] are- and should be- involved with the matter of justice, there is no reason to exclude feminism from that effort. That is why I

believe that religions support feminist efforts, and there is not conflict between them. [...] Maybe there are some doctrines within religion that counteract the work of feminism, or the standpoints of feminism. I can speak for Islam and I can say I cannot find any, on the contrary, some researchers like Esma Barlas [...], she actually shows that [the] Koran is an anti-patriarchal text, it does not encourage or promote father rule or even less, not at all rule of men over women, not at all, it requires completely different things, it focuses on completely different things. The only good example of political leadership, of good political leadership, of good governance, to put it in modern terms, is exercised by women mentioned in [the] Koran, and that's the Queen of Saba. The negative example of political leadership is exercised by a man, which is the Pharaoh, an evil leader who causes a lot of suffering for the Jewish people. And that also tells us something. Another example is the Prophet Abraham, who is called by God to resist the way his father and men of that society lived. And he does that, he protests against their religion and their way of worshiping god, or gods, and what does that say to us? That we are not told by religion or by the Koran to obey our fathers or our men at any price: we have to be individuals, thinking individuals, and the only submission we can have is the one to God, not to anybody else, neither to men or women or human beings in general [...] I would never accept the religion where that [(i.e.: to achieve gender equality)] couldn't be possible, it's against my view of God and against my view of the world, and us human beings. And I remember the time when I didn't have this knowledge, because this is not what imams are preaching in the mosque, they are not, they are actually telling us the opposite. But I found for myself, I read a lot of research work and a lot of other works which showed me that the Book could be seen in a different way, and to see it that way is

much more trustworthy to me than the ways of certain Muslims who exclude women from politics, and power, and resources, put them in the houses to give birth to children and to take care of homes [...] I find a lot of extremely huge number of examples in the favor of gender equality within Islam [...] I also believe that the Prophet, because he was the one who practiced the religion, who lived the religion, he was also [a] feminist, because he fought for women's rights and he actually introduced a number of rights for women, like the right to inherit, the right to get divorce, the right to choose their husband, a lot of judicial rights were given to women making them a subject rather than [an] object, which was the case earlier. He prohibited -or the God through him prohibited- the killing of girls, because that was a shame for a family to get a girl. He did all his housework alone, he never used women for obeying him, for doing housework for him, he made his bed, he sew, [...] he washed his clothes, he washed his dishes, everything that he could do alone he did it alone, he never exercised dominance over people, he talked to people and he talked to women too and women posed questions and God answered to these questions. And the first person who converted to Islam was a woman, the first martyr of Islam is a woman, and women gave a great contribution to the new religion. So there are a number of examples in favor of gender equality, from the practice but also from the Book, from the Scriptures.” (Samira).

“[...] Religion and activism [for women's rights] can go together and in fact only together they have meaning. The Koran, according to my thoughts, does not forbid women from participating in social life and especially does not prohibit them from fighting for their own rights. I think that that is something very often mistaken in the

West, that they think that the Koran has put men one step ahead of women, but in reality the Koran has said that men have greater responsibilities for women and the family, and that men need to fully fulfill those responsibilities and where they don't do so, where there isn't respect, and where there aren't good relations, beginning with the family but also going wider into other areas as well, then women need to organize themselves and in a civilized way create, enter into the creation of politics and laws and their implementation [...] the Koran requires women and men to be proper to one another, to live up to their responsibilities to one another, to be correct and good, and so if people choose to follow that then there is a chance for equality, or if not the word actually "equality", then the chance for all people to be safe and have what is their right to have in terms of how other people behave towards them. But of course there are always different cases where people make different choices, and then they come out and either they are good or they are bad, and so it's on these decisions that it depends on whether there will be economic, psychological, physical equality and safety. If people follow what is said in the Koran and what is said by the Prophet then that is the road to equality. Even if men have dominated, it doesn't have to be that way, and it can be different."

(Vasvija, translation).

"[...] I think religion and feminism can go together because religion gives us spirituality [...] and we will be better in our souls if we believe in something, in something outside, it doesn't have to be a God, it can be something that we can believe [in] [...] when we feel better in our spirits and in our souls. Because feminism is only one way, one look at the world and religion is another, and I want to say [that it is] like this right and left side,

and right and left sides make one, [...] one entity [...] Every time when we talk about Islam, we have to come back to this first beginning of Islam because it was [a] very, very bad time for the women in this pre-Islamic Arabia, it was women treated like animals, they, [men], can kill them, they can have [as many] women as they want, like slaves, they have no rights, and then comes Islam [...] they put many rights for the women, they, [women] can go to court, and divorce if they want, they have their property, they could choose a husband and if they are pregnant and their husband died or something like that the family had to take care of them, and then that Islamic [religion] was some bloom in that world. And now if we compare that time and this time we can say that Islam brought women's rights in that and we have to find [those] rights in Koran and tell our men that we have rights from the Koran and that we have rights in Koran as a main, as our book, [...] a book that gave us that some basing view [...] in which way we should go.”
(Refika).

“I think that [to think that Islam and feminism cannot go together] is very aggressive [...] In a way Koran has elements of equality, that's in Koran and everybody admits that, but I think that Koran should be interpreted from the women's standpoint [...]” (Nasiha).

The main point that all women make is that Islam has at its core an intrinsically egalitarian message. Due to the fact that feminism means fighting for egalitarianism within society, it would then be absurd to think of Islam and feminism as two mutually exclusive concepts. All of them point out that wrong interpretations of the Koran have hampered the possibility for its egalitarian message to be institutionalized in society.

Therefore, it is for them a matter of truthfully reinterpreting the Koran in order for gender equality to be advocated and advanced within its context.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this paper, when considering the definition of Muslim feminism as a legitimate and particular type of feminism, it is possible to classify the women involved in this research as Muslim feminists. This paper intended to explore how this ideological standpoint is constructed, developed and which aspects characterize it and differentiate it from other streams of feminism.

As explained in my discussion in the “Would you Consider yourself a Feminist?: Embracement and Reluctance” section of this paper, even though almost half of the women involved in this research would not consider themselves feminists, when considering the overarching definition of the concept of feminism it is possible to define them as feminists. In the same way, although none of them would identify themselves as Muslim feminists, when taking into consideration the definition of Muslim feminism as explained in the introduction, it is also possible to identify them as Muslim feminists.

Out of eleven of my consultants, two of them identified themselves as Islamic feminists (i.e.: Samira and Fatima). Due to the fact that, as was shown, their identities also encompass the definition of Muslim feminism, it is possible to state that in their case, they can be considered both Islamic and Muslim feminists, although for the rest of my consultants as a group only the latter presents a more suitable definition. According to Spahić Šiljak, “Islamic Feminism is based on the form of state feminism, or as a part of the religious life in which women are able to realize their emancipation [...] Islamic

feminism is tied intricately to the Islamic discourse, its laws (Sharia), and this includes the vision of emancipation” (Spahić Šiljak 2004: 8).

A way to take this research further would be to analyze the presence of Islamic feminist identity among Muslim women as a way to understand the concepts of Islamic and Muslim feminism from a comparative perspective. When carrying out this comparison, it would also be relevant to analyze the confluence of both identities as a way to determine, through real life examples, the similarities and differences found amongst both concepts.

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Meetings with Zilka Spahić Žiljak, Research Mentor

First “e-meeting”: April 6th 2006.

Second meeting with mentor in Sarajevo: May 9th 2006.