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1. Negotiating Empowerment

A Critical Ethnography of Hijabi Women in Sarajevo

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explores the daily enactments and negotiations of self and religious practice performed by hijabi women living in Sarajevo, a city marked by gender inequality in social and economic rights on one hand, and civil and political rights on the other. Against this backdrop of severely challenged positions in both public and private spheres, ten women share stories that reveal how embracing and reinterpreting faith can be an act of personal fulfilment and moral regeneration. It is also a public actualization of agency that problematizes the hegemonic narrative of Islamophobia which renders hijabi women oppressed and disempowered.

Keywords: Islam, gender, piety, identity politics, empowerment

Introduction

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent “War on Terror,” the rising popularity of the hijab in Bosnia and Herzegovina has fascinated and frightened academics, political analysts, and journalists alike (Pyes et al.; Dempsey; Schindler). The image that prevails in the existing reports is one of “prescriptive veiling . . . immediately viewed as oppressive” (Jardim and Vorster: 271), and an indication of the inferior status of women in Islam. However, as Prusher suggests, the application and the extent of veiling vary from community to community. “Today,” she writes, “reasons . . . are as varied as the types of covering women wear, from the long robes and colorful scarves in the North African countries to the black-on-black garb of the conservative Gulf states” (13). Nevertheless, the purpose on the whole is modesty. In her paper “The Question of Hijab: Suppression or Liberation,” ‘Ali argues that a Muslim woman who covers her head makes a statement as to her identity and is, therefore, regarded as modest and of high character. Furthermore, she notes that the hijab does not only constitute the covering of the body but general behavior. “[It] is not merely covering dress but, more importantly, it is behavior, manners, speech, and appearance in public. Dress is only one facet of the total being” (22). In this paper, the hijab is therefore understood to reflect the significance thereof for the individual believer. It is, as we will see later, an expression of choice; it is a mean of personal fulfillment and moral regeneration. Women who choose to wear the hijab are often young, educated, and politically aware. Their choice has various meanings and various origins, but it is a choice, not an imposed restriction.

Be that as it may, political, policy, and media practices continue to portray hijabi women as “incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression” (Mahmood: 7). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this oversimplification and stigmatization of a powerful and complex symbol often hints at the supposed threat posed by “eastern values” at “a critical juncture when [the country] was . . . supposed to be headed to Europe” (Helms: 107). Helms explains that essentialized notions of gender equality, women’s emancipation, and morality are often “the vehicles through which the relative advantages or disadvantages of ‘east’ and ‘west’ are portrayed” (118). When the west is valorized, it is often precisely on the grounds of sexual and other freedoms for women. Thus, “the woman marked as eastern . . . represents aspects alternately feared and admired about the east and Islam, conveyed through her covered head and Islamic dress” (97). To some in Bosnia and Herzegovina, “a covered woman is pious and sexually pure, a symbol of the moral superiority of the east. To others, her scarf signals backwardness, ignorance, the oppression of women, and ultimately eastern inferiority” (97). What is largely missing from the current debates are voices of hijabi women themselves. By bringing attention to their expressions and interpretations of piety in a country at the nexus of east and west, we not only gain important theoretical insight into the construction of the self but also learn new ways to break free from old, oppressive habits of recreating marginalized “others.”

There are multiple and varying discourses that accomplish the task of “othering.” When it comes to hijabi women, these discourses tend to exoticize them and portray them as in dire need of saving. They have been, and continue to be, viewed as objects of an “Orientalizing gaze” (Said). Though Said did not analyze it, his material makes clear that orientalism was infused with representations of gender and sexuality. Eastern “otherness” was constructed

through images of deviant erotic behavior and alluring, unrestrained female sexuality, “albeit often within the constraints of the notorious harem” (Helms: 93). Muslim religious leaders, along with others in the post-colonial world, reorganized this opposition in gendered terms, describing instead “the dangers of a decadent west where the threat to Muslim values is posed by open displays of female sexuality and sex outside patriarchal marriage” (94). In addition, as Macmaster and Lewis point out, western orientalist depictions also shifted since decolonialization. “Whereas Said described an eastern threat conveyed through images of uncontrolled female . . . sexuality, the political threat of the Muslim world is now depicted primarily through images of strictly controlled female sexuality” (94). With the American-led “War on Terror” and growing anti-Muslim immigrant sentiment in Europe, such depictions became ever more visible tools in political rhetoric. Hijabi women, and especially women in burqas and other all-encompassing veils, were used to symbolize the backwardness of Islamic moral development and civilization altogether, and ultimately to justify military action (Abu-Lughod; Cloud). Current discourses in Sarajevo “draw on similar iconography of covered and oppressed women to express fears of the political threat of Islam” (Helms: 94).

Methodology

In 2015, having defended my doctoral thesis at Central European University in Budapest, I returned to my home city of Sarajevo. The goal was to further develop my research into Muslim youth culture, wading into uncharted waters by examining the lives of hijabi women living in the city. I sought the participation of educated, politically aware, and outspoken women under the age of thirty. I used a snowballing sample, which is recognized as an optimal method of gaining participation around sensitive topics and elusive or hard to reach populations (Lindlof and Taylor; Gobo), such as members of groups that are discriminated against. In short, my previous research in Sarajevo meant that I had numerous friends and acquaintances within the local Muslim community, who had invited any future solicitation of help. In 2016, I reached out to these community members to ask for their assistance in identifying and inviting women to take part in the research presented in this paper. Ten women volunteered.

Between 2016 and 2017, I conducted in-depth group interviews with women from working-class backgrounds who were, at the time, students at local universities. The majority of the women’s mothers were housewives. Meanwhile, their fathers worked, or had once worked, in low-paid employment. Given that the parents obtained only a low level of education, the women I spoke to were the first generation in their families to go to university. Most of them grew up in Sarajevo, although their families were often from villages that were ethnically cleansed during the 1992–1995 war. About half the sample lived with their husbands and children; the rest were living with their parents. Despite different living arrangements, all women played an active role in community gatherings as well as extended family life. For instance, cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, and nieces all featured prominently in the women’s accounts. The women as a group were heterogenous in relation to levels of piety and individual practices but all considered their faith to be one of the most important aspects of their lives.

The choice of in-depth interviews allowed me to not only examine and understand the larger context in which the women I interviewed claimed political, economic, and social rights, but also to critique and possibly transform it. More concretely, informed by a critical

ethnographic method, I aim to subvert and signify hegemonic norms and meanings and, in doing so, provide insight into how to transform the existing modes of oppression. In what follows, I describe how hijabi women understand Islam to infuse them with equal or equitable rights to men, the agency they have in their lives to make decisions for themselves, and the empowerment they garner from their relationship with God both as women and as submitters to God. Ultimately, I suggest that Islam is seen and used by these women as an ontological, epistemological, and praxiological source of empowerment.¹

Theorizing Women's Empowerment

In her research on women's empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa, Shalaby notes that, in spite of its popularity, there is as of yet "no universally accepted definition for empowerment" (4). However, while numerous debates over the meaning of empowerment carry on (Porter; Cornwall), some consider its ambiguity an advantage that gives scholars and political practitioners the ability to "work it out in action terms" (cited in Shalaby: 4). The focus, nonetheless, is frequently on the process of empowerment from a developmental or collective standpoint with "little or no interest in understanding the mechanisms of empowerment on the individual level" (4) or its emphasis on the ideas of "agency," "control," and "choice." Be that as it may, in spite of these obvious limitations, the developmental approach to female empowerment and the recognition of gender equality and female empowerment as critical prerequisites for achieving sustainable development have deeply transformed both policy research and practice.

Feminist research also witnessed a shift away from a rather narrow focus on the notion of power that essentially thinks of empowerment as the end goal, towards a more nuanced approach that considers how women's exercise of power may be influenced by larger social, political, and economic contexts (Rao; Rowlands; Berry; Roald). Accordingly, empowerment is seen as a tool to achieve desirable outcomes and specific goals. "Its strength lies in its transformative ability to affect power relations in societies – most importantly, gender relations and the resilient patriarchal structures they produce" (Shalaby: 4). As a result, a rich body of research emerged that concentrates on this dimension of individual versus collective empowerment. Shalaby argues that research by Caroline Moser is especially relevant in this regard as it puts forth an understanding of empowerment as "the ability to determine the choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources" (cited in Shalaby: 4). Naila Kebeer builds on this definition and puts forth what continues to be one of the most cited classifications of empowerment to date. She says that empowerment is "a process of change during which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (cited in Shalaby: 5).

While Kebeer conceptualizes empowerment as a holistic, multistage process that revolves around the individual's capacity to make choices, regardless of the nature or the context of these choices, Moghadam and Senftova understand it as multidimensional process of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural participation and rights. This approach does allow for

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the measurement and evaluation of empowerment across different contexts but it fails to recognize that women's empowerment "cannot simply be defined in terms of being able to perform specific activities or benefitting from propitious outcomes" (cited in Shalaby: 5). Rather, as Haghghat points out, it results from a process whereby women can "freely analyze, develop, and voice their needs and interests without being predefined or unwillingly imposed by religion, government, or social norms and where their influence and control extends beyond women's familial/kinship circles" (cited in Shalaby 5). According to this understanding, the process of women's empowerment goes well beyond the narrow developmental and individualistic approaches; however, the task of defining it gets even more daunting in the context of political and social transformation and uncertainty. This brings us to Sarajevo.

Writing in 1989, Sorabji noted that, for Sarajevo's Muslims, Islam provided "a double identity," two ways of conceptualizing collective identity. On the one hand Islam differentiated Muslims from their Serb/Orthodox and Croat/Catholic neighbors, while on the other hand it gave them membership in a worldwide religious community transcending the bounds of Yugoslavia. At the same time, the notion of identity was one through which opposing orientations often competed. Sorabji, who spent fifteen months doing participant observation in Sarajevo during 1985 and 1986, explained, for example, that the state-authorized Muslim establishment promoted a reconciliation of Islamic and socialist ideologies and of Muslim and Yugoslav identity, while a new, "semi-clandestine Islamic tendency" gazed over at the outside Muslim world, seeking to ally Bosnian Muslims with it.² Pious, but illiterate old women had continually fallen outside the realm of those whose identity could be adjusted or even criticized under the openly oppressive regime, but neither were they ever included in "the realm of the truly admirable" (124).

After the fall of one-party socialism, Muslim identity appeared more fully and freely in the public sphere. This "recovery" of Islam, as some have called it, was bound up with ethnic and national identities pervaded by "a socially, economically, and politically anachronistic patriarchy" (Bardan: 16). Ethno-national elites that came to power after 1989 were supported by ethno-religious elites. Both reduced women's roles to markers of ethnic difference and those responsible for the honor and reproduction of the nation, which, as Spahic-Siljak points out, "significantly excluded them from public life" (2012a: 27). She goes on to observe that "determined re-traditionalization . . . set women back decades, meaning they had to fight again for rights they had already obtained" (2012a: 27). For those encountering Islam for the first time, including the women I interviewed, "to question, let alone eschew, patriarchal conventions was seen as an attack on the Islamic religion itself" (2012a: 27). The present paper puts women's actions into perspective and shows that by choosing and reinterpreting their faith, they exert agency within the context of post-socialist society. Moreover, they exert agency when many think that they have none.

In the groundbreaking *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood cautions that agency "must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides" (34). Exploring the grassroots

² In 1993, a year after the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina established a referendum for independence from Federal Yugoslavia, the term *Musliman* (Muslim) came to be replaced by the national name of *Bosnjak* (Bosniak). For purposes of clarity, I will retain use the term "Muslim" except in quotations where the term "Bosniak" is used.

women's piety movement in the mosques of Cairo, she argues that we should keep "the meaning of agency open" (34) and allow it to emerge from "within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself" (cited in Mahmood: 34). Accordingly, Mahmood proposes that the concept of agency should be delinked from the goals of progressive politics, "a tethering that has often led to the incarceration of the notion of agency within the trope of resistance against oppressive and dominating operations of power" (34). This, of course, does not imply that agency never manifests itself in this manner but, in the case of the piety movement in Egypt, it is a provisional and unexpected consequence of "the effects its ethical practices have produced in the social field" (35). Therefore, Mahmood suggests, in order to understand the political agency of the movement, we must have a proper grasp on its ethical agency. For her, the latter begins with women's choice to embrace and reinterpret their faith. Religious practices such as veiling and praying hereby fit into "a broader process of self-fashioning and remodeling of one's affects and interiority" (Jacobsen: 69). These processes, according to Mahmood, differ from, and can seldom be understood, in reference to liberal-progressive politics.

It is telling, for instance, that the women I interviewed repeatedly emphasized difficulties they face on a daily basis because they show their faith in public and, as a result, "challenge modernity by their very presence" (cited in Spahic-Siljak 2012a: 23). These difficulties are caused in part by neighbors, classmates, and even family members who identify as Muslim, but perceive faith as a private matter. For them, the hijab, which is mostly associated with rural, uneducated, and less privileged women, is an obstacle to modernity. The women I interviewed, all of whom are young, educated, and outspoken in their desire to have their piety recognized in the public sphere, problematize these common yet oppressive interpretations. In order to fully understand the kinds of self-realization that these women aspire to, the present paper engages with Mahmood's viewpoint that juxtaposes liberal-progressive notions like "autonomy" and "freedom" with concepts of "piety" and "subjugation" to religious prescriptions. While critics argue that empiricism of Mahmood's methods lends itself to the same kind of cultural essentialism she wanted to avoid, by fixing desires, goals, and subject forms as unique to specific "cultures" (cited in Jacobsen: 70), my aim is not to resolve important epistemological questions that arise out of her work. Rather, I ask how applicable Mahmood's argument is in the case of young hijabi women in Sarajevo.

The Realization of "Self" through Submission and Obedience

In April 2016, a group of six hijabi women and I met in the inner courtyard of Morica Han, once a roadside inn, and now a restaurant and a bustling cafe. The goal was to conduct a semi-structured group interview on identity and belonging. The topic of the discussion, however, quickly shifted. Two of the girls, Nerma and Dzenana, had been talking about faith upon arrival. Nerma was stressed about the weakness of her faith. This prompted a discussion on moral regeneration or how one should go about improving oneself. The women agreed that it was important to achieve a balance between different dimensions of the self. Mirha, for instance, talked about how important it was to "always think of Allah and Islamic prescriptions" and how this would "lead to happiness in both this life and the afterlife." She went on to explain that everything she does revolves around Islam. "I try to base my daily practices on Islam, and see how they fit within Islam rather than making Islam fit into what I

do day-to-day.” This, Mirha noted, is achieved through submission to God that can be enacted in many ways, for example, trying to further educate oneself or honoring contracts and agreements. Adela added that “living Islamically” is more than “going to the mosque and praying.” She said, “being a good person, being kind to your neighbors, being charitable, raising your kids a certain way. Those things matter a lot.” Here, Adela indicated that part of performing as “one who embraces Islam” is “acting kindly towards others.” Similarly, Elma concluded that this lifestyle offers, “a way to be a good person.” She explained, “a lot of things I do in my everyday life are things that Islam has taught me. People see it as being respectful and nice. There’s been a lot of times where I’ll do something and people will be like, ‘Wow, that’s really kind,’ you know? And I think back on that and I’m like, well it’s because of what I learned in Islam.” In addition, Elma proposed that being raised in a Muslim household allowed her to embody aspects of a “good” person.

What is important to note here is that the women identified qualities of a good person that are not exclusive to Muslims. What distinguishes their understanding of kindness, compassion, and generosity, for example, is the motivation to perform and embrace these qualities, which comes not only from a general sense of altruism but also from an understanding that these are the things that God wants them to do, and how God asks them to interact with others. Dzenana reflected upon this idea when she stated that, “an Islamic way of life” meant “striving hard to improve oneself and to remember God as often as possible through submission.” However, in contrast to Mirha, Adela, and Elma who spoke of submission through empathy and kindness, for Dzenana it mattered more to participate in daily prayers, wear the hijab, and not take part in a lifestyle that may put her in compromising positions, especially with someone of the opposite sex who is not her husband. She believed that her choice to “meet the expectations of God” enabled her to express her piety along with being a wife or a student, both of which she negotiated and understood as conducive to and guided by her understanding of Islam.

Nerma, however, complained that it is often difficult to find this balance. “I struggle because everything I do is meant to echo my faith. When I study and when I work; when I eat and when I go out. All of this is an afterthought, because I’m thinking of when I’m meant to pray, for instance.” Mirha countered by saying, “Allah doesn’t say we have to pray all the time. This isn’t something that’s required of us. What you do in your everyday life, when you do it in a way that is allowed; that is also a form of worship.” Nerma agreed, provoking Dzenana to ask why she then found it so difficult that her everyday acts should reflect faith. “It’s because what I want is not always the same as what Islam wants,” Nerma rationalized. “I try to become as good as possible. In the eyes of God. That is an eternal goal, right? But to find a balance between my faith, my work, my studies, my relationships, that is hard.” She went on to say, “I try to do good, but I lack the knowledge to understand all of the things I’m meant to do. As a true Muslim. I often have to compose myself and say, ‘right, this is what God wants of you, so go on and do it.’ There are so many things you’re told growing up, and some of it you have to reject and some of it you have to accept. But it is not easy.” Elma agreed, referring to her experience with motherhood. She said, “Islam gives mothers the highest position, right? Growing up, I was told that I’d be revered as a mother. My parents were pious people and this is what they told me. Be a good mother. In eastern cultures, to be ‘complete,’ a woman needs to fulfill this expectation.” This idea, Elma argued, resonates in Bosnia and Herzegovina but

only to an extent. “Mostly,” she claimed, “motherhood is not really appreciated or socially acknowledged. I thought of continuing my education after university because I was afraid that if I don’t, society will tell me that I’ve achieved nothing in life. Now, I think I’ll stay at home and raise my kids, but I have to remind myself that this is something Allah wants, and he knows what’s right. To make this decision was very difficult.” What Elma said alludes to the gist of my entire research – women on the crossroads of a specific Islamic tradition and modernity, religious norms and secular-liberal politics, family and public engagement.

If we look at how these women talk about the self, they come together in the understanding that “being Muslim implies that there is a certain mode of being that one should seek to achieve, and that this mode requires an effort on the part of the individual to work with herself” (Jacobsen: 73). For some, this effort is seen as strenuous. For others, it is less so. The “practices of the self” for realizing this mode of being are numerous, and include contemplation, remembering Allah, prayer, living your everyday life within the limits of what is allowed, love of God, fear of God, and trying to attain a pure intention in your acts. Meanwhile, as Jacobsen also shows in her research on young Muslims in Norway, “ego” and “desire” are singled out as “domains of the self that these practices are directed at” (73). The young women motivated and called upon themselves and each other to acknowledge the moral obligation to submit to the “will of Allah,” to realize that “I’m working for God.” An important role is hereby attributed to the acquisition of religious knowledge “in order to know ‘what God wants from me’ and to shape yourself in accordance with this will” (73).

The Realization of “Self” through Choice

The stress on the acquisition of knowledge was largely shaped through the idea of an individual and personal search for truth. The women’s desire to learn about Islam in order to better “understand,” was paralleled by their criticism of their parents’ generation, in particular, “their supposed ‘traditional,’ ‘non-reflexive’ emulation of religious practices” (Jacobsen: 74). It is telling in this regard that the women frequently spoke of relatives, friends, and acquaintances who were “coerced into religion” by their parents. They agreed that this was wrong, and that a person’s individual choice should be respected. Emina noted that, “there’s nothing wrong in parents trying to guide their kids. But this should be done by teaching them and explaining stuff. Kids need to choose to do the right thing themselves.” Mirha agreed, “My cousin was raised in a strict household. She was made to wear the hijab but it was not something she wanted. Now that she is older, I can see that she is rebelling. She is turning away from Islam and it’s because my uncle didn’t allow her to explore Islam on her own terms.” Others, meanwhile, commended how their parents had “given them a lot of freedom” and “always let them make their own choices.” The topic of coercion was central to how the women talked about their upbringing, and it was “regularly portrayed as something of ‘the past’—associated with ‘tradition’ or ‘culture,’ while ‘individual freedom’ was viewed as modern and advanced—associated with ‘authenticated Islam’” (cited in Jacobsen: 77). Each of the women I spoke to saw themselves as responsible for acquiring knowledge of Islam, “for following the moral codes of Islam, and for intents, as well as for their acts” (Jacobsen: 74). The stress is thus on submission to God’s will and on embodying Islamic norms; however, “resisting the . . . traditions of the parents . . . becomes necessary when such traditions . . . prevent self-realization as a true Muslim” (74).

Hana, one of the four women I met for an interview in June 2016, talked about how important it was to work on “purifying intentions,” so that “one would not act piously just to gain praise and recognition but rather to ‘submit’ and realize the exemplary model of the pious self.” Seated down for tea close to Sebilj, a pseudo-Ottoman style wooden fountain in the center of Baščaršija square, Hana explained how she dissects, and tries to rearrange, her inner motivations. Her acts in this regard were directed towards developing skills and capacities necessary for undertaking particular kinds of moral action. While this construction of the self as something that needs to be disciplined and controlled contradicts the idea of self-realization as bound with progressive concepts of personal autonomy and freedom, each of the women I spoke to conceived of themselves as in a position of choice vis-à-vis the Islamic tradition. In their stories of how they had come to practice Islam, the women insisted on the fact that they themselves had desired and chosen to know more about the Islamic tradition, to wear or not to wear the hijab, to pray five times a day, and so forth. To have made a choice was seen to secure “the legitimacy of religious practice as a true sign of obedience to Allah, to be distinguished from obedience that emerged rather from social conformity or pressure, unreflexive traditional practice and acceptance of the authority of parents” (Jacobsen: 76).

Lamija, for instance, noted that “in the eyes of God we’re all equal. And this gives me choice, right? So if I want to wear the hijab, I wear the hijab. If I don’t want to wear the hijab, I don’t have to wear the hijab. It’s my choice.” Mahmood proposes that many scholars who argue that the hijab is a symbol of resistance to westernization and exploitation of woman’s body fail to emphasize the virtue of modesty and piety that was “the decisive argument for many women in deciding to adopt [it]” (16). However, while Mahmood is concerned primarily with elaborating such concepts of self in the context of the piety movement in Egypt as distinct from and opposed to those put forth by liberal-progressive frameworks, my focus is rather on how different concepts of self, and self-realization associated with them, become transformed by and negotiated through ideas of personal autonomy and freedom. The case of hijabi women in Sarajevo suggests that it would be a mistake “to see the kind of relationship that [these] young women . . . had to themselves and how they constituted themselves as moral subjects as uniquely shaped and molded within a singular and coherent Islamic discursive tradition that can be ‘counter-posed’ to the secular-liberal tradition” (Jacobsen: 75-76). Instead, this shaping and molding of subjectivities takes place at the intersection of several different and sometimes contrasting traditions.

In Sarajevo, these overlaps intrude with fascinating ambiguities and ambivalences. Though it is clear that the women I spoke to saw the hijab as not only a practice geared at shaping the self that is “working for God,” but also as an expression of “who I am” and “who I choose to be,” its visibility has allowed both observant and non-observant Muslims to assert their sophistication and worthiness in contrast to “this form of dress . . . ridiculously foreign to them, as Europeans” (Helms: 106). Hence, as Cooke notes, “even when women make their own decisions concerning the veil, their decisions may be used by others to serve other goals” (cited in Spahic-Siljak 2012b: 67). The women I spoke to were adamant in their rejection of misguided discourses that surround them. For instance, when Mirha talked about Muslim women being well-educated, she spoke of the access that women have had, and do have, in achieving knowledge despite messages that portray schooling as unavailable to them. She asserted that Islam is what makes Muslim women modern and civilized, “as a religion that

promotes learning and gives women more rights than other religions.” Moreover, with the exception of Elma, whose views were discussed in the previous section, the women I spoke to did not struggle to reconcile their domestic roles and their engagement in the public sphere. In fact, the logic was that Bosnia’s unique character of being simultaneously Muslim and European was what allowed women to do both. These bridging metaphors, however, “left unspoken the orientalist implication that the rest of the Muslim world, the not-European and fully ‘eastern’ part, therefore lacked civilization” (Helms: 104).

I am aware that much of what is portrayed in media tends to focus on those fully “eastern” parts. It is thus undeniable that often when a person hears “Muslim,” images of subservient, silent women in need of saving are the first that come to mind. This, according to the women I spoke to, paints an inaccurate picture of all Muslims. So, when Mirha talked about education or when Hana spoke about women having occupations such as doctors and Nerma discussed her admiration of a Muslim woman political activist, they sought to assert their agency with a voice that, with some exceptions, has rarely been heard before. Dzenana took it a step further by outwardly saying that she embodies many powerful characteristics because of an agency provided to her through Islam. She said, “my strength comes from my conviction and faith in Islam that is empowering to women. I’m reclaiming Islam for myself. One that uplifts by giving me rights considered revolutionary in the past. This spirit of Islam guides my quest to be treated as equal.” In the process of speaking about their rights, women like Dzenana thus problematized the hegemonic narrative that works to negate their agency.

This all is not to say that the Qur’an does not set out certain roles for women and men. The women I spoke with used the term “equality” almost exclusively, but I suggest that in terms of gender roles, the Qur’an, at least from these women’s perspectives, actually provides equity for men and women. However, how men and women are viewed in the eyes of God, and how they should view each other, should be understood in terms of equality. The women argued that the Qur’an provides guidelines for specific roles for women and men based on inherent strengths. While the roles are different, the women claimed that they warrant the same amount of respect and the same effort of work thus implying equity. For example, as noted earlier, Islam privileges the role of a mother specifically. Elma explained, “there’s a saying from the Prophet, may peace be upon him, that said that paradise lies under the feet of your mother. It’s a figure of speech, of course, but it implies that you really have to respect her. The highest respect that you can possibly give to anyone.” For Nejra, Islam not only makes the distinction between roles for women and men, but it is through this discussion that family roles are also set forth and vice versa. This was apparent in her idea that a man’s role is to provide and a woman’s role is to nurture. Selma referenced the Qur’anic designation of gender roles as well by saying, “you have your own role, he has his own role.” She was able to further explain the reasoning behind this noting that, “some things are different, right? Like, a woman nurtures. She takes care of children. Men provide. I feel like inherently there’s something inside of us that’s a little bit different and there’s some talk around that in the Qur’an. So, yes, the Qur’an does reference our differences.”

It is important to note here that the women agreed that the role given to or assumed by a woman is not secondary to the role given to or assumed by a man thus suggesting that, even within the Qur’anic discussion of equity and equality, there is still a hierarchy in terms of familial roles and respect. This, in turn, points towards a specific Qur’anic source of women’s

empowerment, significant because it demonstrates that the women I spoke to were truly committed to, and believed in, their ability to use their growing knowledge of Islam to dismantle misappropriations of both their faith and women's propriety in numerous discourses that work to oppress them. These women demonstrated agency to explore and understand their faith for themselves and to live out that faith in ways that they see as compatible with their understanding of the Qur'an. However, this should not be seen as a sign of their "liberation" from oppressive traditions or social norms. Instead, "it manifests the effects of a particular form of liberal governance, a particular mode of relating to the self in which the individual is responsible for creating [their] own identity" (Jacobsen: 77) and mode of agency.

Conclusion

The process of transition between two opposing social, economic, and political systems that Bosnia and Herzegovina faced after 1989 brought with it "strong ethno-national tides that swept away whatever advances towards equality women had made, and re-instituted traditional gender roles, diminishing the role of women in public life and politics . . ." (Spahic-Siljak 2012c: 251). This re-traditionalization of gender roles was further assisted by the revival of religion that relegated women largely to family life thus again subordinating their rights to "higher goals." Under one-party socialism, these goals had been the Communist Party's economic agenda. In the post-socialist period they were, and still are, "the agendas and attitudes of ethno-national and ethno-religious ruling elites" (251). The image of a hijabi woman as the oppressed victim of a patriarchal controlling power, in turn, enabled critics of the ruling elite to argue that the strong influence of Islam on politics cast doubt on "Bosnia's European character and preferred modernity" (Bartulovic: 276). With this as background, the present paper positioned hijabi women at the center of research, and emphasized their conceptions of self not as victims of oppressive structures but as actors in their own lives.

The women I spoke to saw the hijab as a sign of closeness to God, not as a symbol of political Islam, ethnicity, or the country's inflexible value systems that struggle to coexist with European norms. Furthermore, as research from across Europe also revealed (Jacobson; Amir-Moazami and Salvatore; Amir-Moazami et al.; Chapman), the hijab is a part of a broader process of self-fashioning that sits at the crossroads of several internally heterogeneous and contested discursive traditions. It is a practice geared at shaping a self that is "working for God," as well as an expression of choice assessed in terms of liberal-progressive conceptions of personal autonomy and freedom. Hence, to see these conceptions as separate from processes of self-realization would be a mistake. Moreover, it would completely ignore their role in how hijabi women in Sarajevo engage the Islamic tradition and negotiate the notion of submitting to Allah.

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